THE PUTNAM HALL MYSTERY

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD

PUTNAM HALL SERIES

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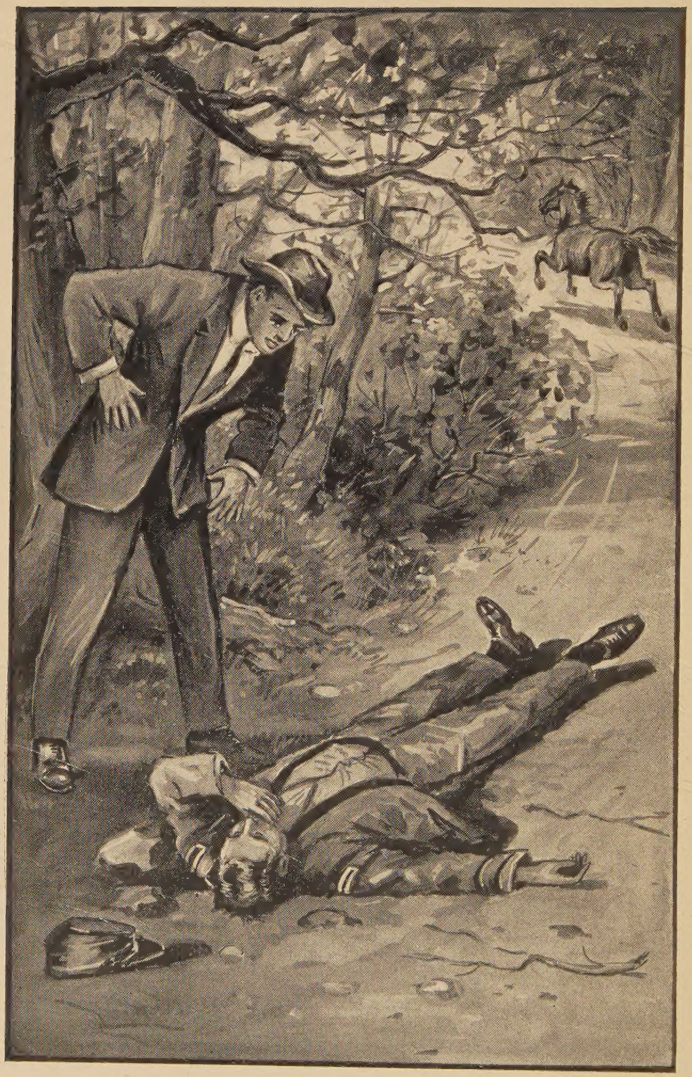

THE YOUNG MAJOR STILL LAY WITH HIS EYES CLOSED.
Frontispiece (*Page* 19.)

The Putnam Hall Mystery.

THE PUTNAM HALL MYSTERY

Or, The School Chums' Strange Discovery

BY

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD

AUTHOR OF "THE PUTNAM HALL CADETS," "THE PUTNAM HALL RIVALS," "THE ROVER BOYS SERIES," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

BOOKS BY ARTHUR M. WINFIELD

THE PUTNAM HALL SERIES

THE PUTNAM HALL CADETS.
THE PUTNAM HALL RIVALS.
THE PUTNAM HALL CHAMPIONS.
THE PUTNAM HALL REBELLION.
THE PUTNAM HALL ENCAMPMENT.
THE PUTNAM HALL MYSTERY.

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THE ROVER BOYS ON TREASURE ISLE.
THE ROVER BOYS AT COLLEGE.
THE ROVER BOYS DOWN EAST.

(Other volumes in preparation.)

12mo, Cloth. Illustrated
Price, per volume, 60 cents, postpaid

GROSSET & DUNLAP, Publishers, New York

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The Putnam Hall Mystery

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INTRODUCTION

My Dear Boys:

This story is complete in itself, but forms the sixth volume in a line issued under the general title of "Putnam Hall Series."

As mentioned several times, this line was started because many young folks wanted to know what happened at Putnam Hall Military School previous to the arrival at that institution of the Rover boys, as already related in my "Rover Boys Series."

To gratify this curiosity I wrote the first volume of this series, called "The Putnam Hall Cadets," showing how Captain Putnam organized his famous school, and how it was Jack Ruddy and Pepper Ditmore came to be among his first pupils.

In the second book, entitled "The Putnam Hall Rivals," I gave the particulars of several contests on the field of sports, and also told about a thrilling balloon ride and of an odd discovery in the woods.

Following the second book came a third, "The Putnam Hall Champions," with more bitterly-

contested games, in one of which young Major Ruddy's enemies played him a foul trick.

From the opening of the school there had been dissatisfaction with one of the teachers, and when another was engaged who proved to be a man of peculiar whims, the boys went into open revolt, as related in another volume, called "The Putnam Hall Rebellion." The cadets literally ran away, and did not return to the Hall until Captain Putnam came upon the scene to straighten matters out.

The rebellion was followed by a grand outing, as related in "The Putnam Hall Encampment." The cadets marched far away from the school, to the shore of a beautiful lake, and there our heroes managed to have a good time in spite of the mean work of several of their enemies.

In the present volume are related the particulars of a most puzzling mystery which at one time threatened to bring disaster to the whole school. How the mystery was at last solved I leave for the pages which follow to explain.

Again I thank both young and old for all the nice things they have said about my books. I hope the reading of the volumes affords all both pleasure and profit.

Affectionately and sincerely yours,

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD.

THE PUTNAM HALL MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

AN ENCOUNTER ON THE ROAD

"HERE we are again, as the clown says in the circus!"

"Right you are, Pepper. And I'll be glad to get back to Putnam Hall once more," responded Major Jack Ruddy, as he followed his chum from the lake steamer to the Cedarville dock.

"Hello, there is Andy!" cried Pepper Ditmore, as he caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd of cadets. "Andy, where have you been? Why didn't you come on the boat with us?"

"I got in last night," answered Andy Snow. "How are you, anyway?" And he shook hands cordially.

"Oh, I'm as fine as a new-tooth comb," answered Pepper Ditmore, with a grin. "Ready for study and fun."

"Especially fun, I'll wager. How about it, Jack?"

"Oh, Pepper usually manages to get his share," came from the young major of the Putnam Hall battalion. "But, Andy, did you—— Hi, look where you are going, will you, Ritter!" cried Jack, rather angrily.

A tall youth, carrying a big dress-suit case, had forced his way through the crowd, hitting Jack in the knee with his baggage.

"What do you want to block the way for?" demanded Reff Ritter, sourly. "Think you own the dock?"

"I've got as much right here, Ritter, as you have!" retorted the young major, sharply. "Don't you knock me again like that."

"I will—if you get in my way."

"If you do, you'll take the consequences."

"Bah! Don't you try to dictate to me, Jack Ruddy!" growled Reff Ritter. "You got the best of me last term, but you'll not get the best of me this term, I'll tell you that!"

"Phew! Ritter is somewhat peppery!" whispered Andy Snow.

"I guess I know the reason," came from a student named Dale Blackmore.

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you later—too much of a crowd here," rejoined Dale.

About twenty cadets, all bound for Putnam Hall Military Academy, had arrived on the boat from Ithaca, and these, along with some others who had come down to the dock to see the boat come in, gathered around Jack Ruddy and Reff Ritter to see the outcome of the unexpected encounter.

Jack Ruddy had good cause to consider Reff Ritter his enemy. But he had hoped that during the term now opening at the school the bully of Putnam Hall would keep his distance.

"I am not trying to dictate to you, Ritter," answered Jack, as calmly as he could. "But I don't propose to let you hit me with your suitcase."

"Huh! It was an accident!" growled Reff.

"Oh, come on, Reff!" put in Gus Coulter, the bully's close crony. "Let us get good seats in the carryall."

"That's the talk! Let us get in before the others take the seats!" came from Nick Paxton, another crony.

He pushed ahead, and his elbow caught Pepper Ditmore directly in the ribs.

"Not quite so swift, Paxton!" cried Pepper, and he gave the cadet a quick shove backwards. Pax-

ton bumped into Reff Ritter, lost his footing, and fell over the dress-suit case in the bully's hand.

"Hurrah! One down!" cried Andy Snow. "How many yards to gain for a touchdown, Nick?"

"What do you mean by knocking me down!" roared Nick Paxton, as he scrambled to his feet. I'll not stand for it."

"Then sit down again," answered Pepper, merrily. "And next time keep your elbow out of my ribs," he added. "Come on, we don't want to get left!" he added to his chums.

A bolt was made by many of the cadets for the Putnam Hall carryall, and soon a crowd was inside and on the front seat, talking, joking and cheering, as suited the mood of each individual. Jack, Pepper, Andy and Dale managed to crowd inside, throwing their suitcases on the top. Gus Coulter got in also, but when he saw that Reff Ritter and Nick Paxton had been left, he scrambled out again, and his place was taken by Fred Century, another student.

"Hello, Peleg, old sport!" cried Pepper, gaily, to the driver of the turnout. "How have you been for the past fifty years?"

"Oh, I'm very well, thank you," responded Peleg Snuggers.

"Heard you had a fortune left to you," went on

Pepper, with a wink at his chums. "Old uncle died and left you half a million."

"Three-quarters of a million," put in Andy Snow, scenting fun. "All in gold, too."

"Isn't that fine!" said Jack. "Peleg, how about lending me ten or fifteen dollars?"

"I could use a five-spot myself," added Dale.

"I'd like to borrow about fifty for a new bicycle," came from Fred Century.

"Don't be modest about lending us the cash," went on Pepper. "Just hand it out as if you had always had it."

"I ain't had no fortune left to me!" burst out the general utility man, desperately. "Who said I had?"

"Why, everybody knows it, Peleg," responded Pepper. "Come, don't be modest about it. Was it really three-quarters of a million?"

"Maybe it was more," suggested Jack.

"If I were you, Peleg, I'd not carry so much around in my pockets," said Dale.

"I ain't had a cent left to me!" shouted the driver of the carryall. "This is some of your jokes, an' I want you to stop it! Oh, dear, now the school's opened ag'in I suppose there won't be no rest fer nobuddy!" And he heaved a mountainous sigh.

"Oh, Peleg! Don't be angry with me!" mur-

mured Pepper, with a trace of tears in his voice. "If you get angry I'll die!"

"You behave yourself, Pepper Ditmore, or I won't drive you to the Hall."

"Peleg, don't you want me to drive?" asked Andy, who was on the front seat. "I'm a cracker-jack at driving."

"Not much! Don't you tech them hosses!" shouted the general utility man in alarm. "That off hoss is a new one an' he's mighty skittish, I can tell you. This mornin' when I was hookin' him up he nigh kicked the leg off o' me!"

"Say, how are we going to get to the Hall?" came in ugly tones from Reff Ritter. He, with six other boys, was standing beside the carryall.

"Captain Putnam said he'd send down some carriages," answered Peleg Snuggers. "There they come now," and he pointed to the turnouts.

"Pshaw! I wanted to go in the carryall," grumbled Ritter.

"So did I," added Gus Coulter.

"Well, this is full, so you'll have to take the carriages," answered Peleg Snuggers. "Everybody hold fast!" he shouted, as he took up the reins.

"We are off!" shouted Pepper, gaily. "Farewell to Cedarville and ho! for Putnam Hall!"

"Wish I had room, I'd turn a handspring for you," came from Andy, who was quite an acrobat.

"Now don't you cut up any monkey-shines," pleaded the driver of the carryall. "That new hoss won't stand for 'em."

"All right, Peleg, I'll keep as quiet as a lamb without a tail."

"Why is a lamb without a tail quiet?" asked Fred Century, quickly.

"Give it up, Fred. Why?"

"Because he has no tale to tell."

"Wow!"

"What a joke!"

"Throw him out!"

"Give him some cotton to eat!"

"Say, do keep quiet!" pleaded Peleg Snuggers, as the boys in the carryall commenced to push Fred from one seat to another. "Want these hosses to run away with you?"

"Better draw it mild," suggested Major Jack. "We don't want any accident on the way to the Hall." He looked back at the crowd left on the dock. "Has anybody seen Bert Field?" he asked.

"Yes, I saw him last week," answered a student named Paul Singleton. "He'll be here to-morrow."

"How about Emerald?" asked Pepper.

"Coming to-night," answered Andy. "He went

to Ireland this summer, and his brogue is worse than ever."

"Never mind, Emerald is a good fellow," said Major Jack. "His heart is as big as a barrel."

"Say, but wasn't Reff Ritter mad!" came from Dale.

"Oh, he makes me tired," answered Pepper. "After all that happened last term wouldn't you think he'd behave himself better?"

"It isn't in him to behave himself," answered Fred Century. "He is a bully and always will be."

"Well, he has got to keep his distance this term," said Major Jack, with a firm look on his face. "I am not going to stand for what I have in the past."

"Nor I," added Pepper. "If he doesn't keep his distance he'll suffer for it."

The carryall was now leaving the little village of Cedarville. Soon it came out on a country road that ran in the direction of Putnam Hall.

It was an ideal day in early September, and the cadets returning to the school were in high spirits. One started to sing and the others joined in.

"Hello, there goes the Pornell Academy stage!" cried Pepper, presently.

"And there are some fellows we know!" returned Jack, as the turnout belonging to a rival school came closer. "Roy Bock and Bat Sedley."

"I'll bet they are sore over what happened last June," cried Pepper.

"It was their own fault that they suffered," came from Andy.

"Look out!" sang out Dale, and dodged down in the carryall.

Spat! A half-decayed apple struck the side of the turnout. Spat! came one through the open window. Then the skin of a banana followed, landing in Jack's lap.

"Stop that, Bock!"

"Don't throw things in here, Sedley!"

"Something to remember us by!" shouted Roy Bock, the bully of Pornell Academy, and he threw another soft apple into the carryall. It landed on Pepper's arm, leaving quite a mess there.

"All right, if that's your game!" cried Pepper, and feeling in his pocket he brought forth an orange he had purchased on the boat. Taking careful aim, he let fly with all force. The orange landed fairly and squarely on Roy Bock's nose.

"Ouch!" roared Roy Bock, and clapped his hand to his nose, which began to bleed.

"Here's something for you, Sedley!" cried Andy, and sent a handful of peanut shells into the Pornell student's face.

"I'll fix you fellows!" roared Roy Bock in a rage, and catching up a heavy book that was on

the seat beside him he started to throw the volume at Jack and Pepper.

But the volume slipped and went sailing in the air in another direction, catching poor Peleg Snuggers on the cheek. The driver of the carryall was so startled that he let go the reins and fell from his seat into the dust of the road.

As the reins dropped at their heels, one of the horses—the new one—threw up his head in sudden fright. Then he made a mad lunge forward, dragging his mate with him. The carryall gave a lurch and a bound that sent the occupants flying into each other's laps.

"Stop the team!" was the cry.

"The horses are running away!"

CHAPTER II

THE CADETS OF PUTNAM HALL

It was true, the team was running away. One of the horses was a spirited animal and he now had the bit in his teeth. The boys in the rear of the turnout looked back, to see Peleg Snuggers still lying in the highway. The stage belonging to Pornell Academy had turned down a side road.

"Can't you stop them, Andy?" asked Jack Ruddy.

"I don't see how," was the answer from the youth on the front seat. "I can't get hold of the lines."

"We must stop 'em somehow!" cried Fred Century. "Otherwise we'll have a smash-up, sure!"

"Whoa! whoa!" yelled half a dozen, but these cries only served to scare the team more, and away they shot along the country road, sending the carryall swaying from side to side.

"Look! look!" yelled Andy, suddenly. "The regular road is shut off! They are repairing it!"

The boys gazed ahead and saw that some wooden horses and planking had been placed across the highway. This side of the barrier some bars had been taken from a fence, so that those using the road might drive around, through an orchard belonging to a farmer named Darrison.

"We are going to strike those planks!" cried Dale Blackmore.

"Maybe the team will try to jump them!" came from Fred.

"If they do, they'll smash the carryall sure!" answered Pepper. "Perhaps we had better drop out at the rear."

"Look out!" sang out somebody, and just then the carryall left the highway and turned into the orchard. Then came a scraping, as the top of the turnout hit the low-hanging branches of some apple trees.

"Whoa! stop that wagon!" yelled a man's voice, and Amos Darrison appeared from among the trees. He made a leap for the team, but they swerved to one side. Then came a crash, as one of the wheels caught in a stump. Over went the carryall, with the boys in it. Andy, quick to act, used his acrobatic abilities by leaping into the branches of a nearby tree. Then the farmer caught the team and stopped them.

"Anybody hurt?" was Pepper's question, as he crawled out of the wreck.

"I'm all right," answered Fred.

"I got a twisted ankle, that's all," came from Dale, as he limped out.

"Look at Jack!" cried several. "He's hurt!"

All looked and saw the young major of the school battalion lying flat on his back in the front of the carryall. He had a nasty cut on the temple and his eyes were closed.

"He is dead!" murmured Pepper, hoarsely.

"Oh, don't say that!" said Andy, in sudden terror. He had just dropped to the ground.

"If he ain't dead he's putty badly hurted," said the farmer who owned the orchard.

Pepper caught his chum in his arms and brought him out and laid him on the grass.

"He is still breathing!" he cried. "Get some water and we'll bathe his face. Maybe that will bring him around."

"I'll get the water!" exclaimed Dale, and ran towards a well located at the side of the orchard.

To those who have read the other volumes in this "Putnam Hall Series," the lads already mentioned will need no special introduction. For the benefit of others, let me state that Jack Ruddy and Pepper Ditmore were close chums, living, when at home, in the western part of New York

State. Jack was slightly the older of the two and was of rather a serious turn of mind. Pepper was full of fun, and on that account was frequently called "The Imp."

As related in my first volume, entitled "The Putnam Hall Cadets," the lads left home to become cadets at a new institution of learning located on Cayuga Lake. This new school was presided over by Captain Victor Putnam, a retired army officer, who had modeled his institution somewhat after the famous military academy at West Point. It was a large school, ideally located on the shore of the lake, and had attached to it a gymnasium, a boathouse, and several other buildings. On the lower floor of the main building were the classrooms, the mess hall, and the offices, and upstairs were the dormitories.

Arriving at the school, Jack and Pepper soon made a host of friends, including the acrobatic Andy Snow; Dale Blackmore, who was a great football player; Paul Singleton, who was usually called "Stuffer" because of his constant desire to eat; Joseph Hogan, commonly addressed as "Emerald" because of his Irish blood, and Joe Nelson, who was one of the best scholars the school ever had. They also made some enemies, the greatest of them being Reff Ritter, the big bully, and Gus Coulter and Nick Paxton, his cronies.

Not long after the students learned how to drill and to march they were allowed to ballot for officers. A bitter contest was waged, which resulted in Jack being chosen major of the Hall battalion. A bully named Dan Baxter had wanted to be major, and he bribed Gus Coulter and some others to vote for him, but without avail. It may be added here that Baxter was now away on a vacation, but had written that he was going to return to the school before long.

During their first term at Putnam Hall the chums had several adventures, not the least of which was one in the woods, where they rescued George Strong, one of the teachers, from two of his relatives who were insane.

Mr. Strong's ancestry dated back to the Revolution, and he told the cadets about a family treasure buried in the vicinity of the lake. How the boys went in search of the treasure, and how they had numerous other adventures, was related in the second volume of this series, called "The Putnam Hall Rivals."

With the coming of the next summer, the thoughts of the students turned to various sports, and in the third volume, "The Putnam Hall Champions," I told how the chums entered several contests, both on land and on the lake, and won out. At that time Fred Century was a pupil at

Pornell Academy, but Fred became so disgusted at the actions of Roy Bock, Bat Sedley, and some others, that he quit the rival institution of learning and came to Putnam Hall, where he was given a warm welcome.

The encounters that Jack and his chums had with Reff Ritter and his cronies were numerous, and more than once Ritter did his best to get the young major into serious trouble. Once he drugged Jack with some French headache powders, and when he was exposed Captain Putnam would have expelled him had not Jack very generously asked that he be given another chance. For this any ordinary youth would have been grateful, but gratitude did not appear to be a part of Reff Ritter's make-up, and he soon showed himself to be as mean as ever.

For some time matters ran along smoothly at Putnam Hall, but then came trouble of an entirely new kind. Once, during the absence of Captain Putnam and George Strong, the school was left in charge of two other teachers—Josiah Crabtree and Pluxton Cuddle. Crabtree was dictatorial to a degree and Cuddle was a man of queer ideas, one being that boys ate entirely too much.

As told in the volume called "The Putnam Rebellion," the two teachers sought to subdue the boys by starving them and locking them in their

dormitories. They rebelled, left the school by stealth, and marched away, to camp in the woods. There the rebels split up, one party under Major Jack and the other under Ritter. At last Captain Putnam put in an appearance, and Major Jack explained matters. As a consequence, the cadets went back to the Hall, and then Josiah Crabtree and Pluxton were called on to explain. Crabtree was retained, after a stern lecture from the master of the school, but Cuddle was discharged.

It was Captain Putnam's custom to take his students out once or twice a year to what was called an encampment—the lads marching to some spot where they could pitch their tents and go in for a touch of real army life, with target shooting, sham battles, and the like. In the next volume of the series, called "The Putnam Hall Encampment," I told how the cadets left the Hall and marched to a distant lake. Their camping outfit was sent ahead by wagons, but the wagons got lost, and were finally found in the possession of Roy Bock and some other students of Pornell, they having made off with them while the drivers were in a roadhouse obtaining refreshments. For this trick, Pepper and some of the others got after the Pornellites and made them prisoners in a cave, from which they could escape only by going out a

back way, through some water and mud, and thorny bushes.

While they were playing a certain trick in Cedarville, Jack and Pepper fell in with a youth named Bert Field. He was a queer lad, but did the chums a good turn, and in return they promised to help him. He was trying to locate a certain old man who was defrauding him out of some property. The old man was discovered during a visit to a mysterious mill said to be haunted, and by the chums' aid Bert Field got what was coming to him. It was thought best to send Bert to school, and he said he wanted to go to Putnam Hall.

"We'll be glad to have him with us," said Jack, and so it was settled.

Following the encampment had come the regular summer vacation, and the cadets had scattered far and wide, Jack and Pepper going for a cruise around the Great Lakes, and Andy and Dale going to Asbury Park and Atlantic City. Reff Ritter had started for a summer in the Adirondacks, but unexpected word from home, of which more will be said later, had caused him to give up the outing.

CHAPTER III

SOMETHING ABOUT A RUNAWAY

While Dale and Andy ran off to get the water, the other boys gathered around Jack. The young major still lay with his eyes closed, breathing faintly.

"He got a bad crack on the head," remarked Fred Century.

"He certainly did," whispered another cadet. "If he doesn't come around what shall we do?"

"How did the team happen to run away?" questioned Amos Darrison.

"Some fellows from Pornell Academy threw things at us," explained Pepper. "We'll have an account to settle with 'em for this," he added grimly.

"Wonder how poor Snuggers made out?"

"Here he comes now," was the answer, and looking back toward the highway, the cadets saw the driver of the carryall approaching on a swift limp.

"Did ye stop 'em?" he gasped. "Oh, dear, what

a bust-up! But it wasn't my fault—you boys can prove that, can't ye?"

"We can, Peleg," answered Pepper. "Much hurt?"

"I got a nasty twist to my back when I tumbled. Say, what's the matter with Major Ruddy?" And the general utility man forgot his own pains as he gazed at the motionless form of Jack.

The cadets told him, and in the midst of the explanation Dale and Andy came back with a bucket of water and a tin dipper. The major's face was bathed, and a little water was put into his mouth, and with a gulp he opened his eyes and stared around him.

"Oh, my head!" he murmured. "Who hit me?"

"You were in the carryall smash-up, Jack," answered Pepper. "You got a bad one on the head."

"Oh, yes, I remember now." Jack sat up and placed his hand to his forehead. "Bloody, eh? Say, that was a crack, all right!"

"It's lucky you weren't killed," said Andy.

"Better take it easy for a while," advised Dale. "Maybe we had better get a doctor."

"Oh, I guess I'll be all right after a bit, Dale," answered the young major, who had a horror of being placed on the sick list. "The knocking around stunned me, that's all."

"Let me tie a handkerchief over that cut," said Pepper.

"Here, I've got some court-plaster," said Fred, producing a little package. "Let us bind it up with that."

This was done, and after he had had a drink of water, Jack said he felt much better. But when he got up on his feet he was rather shaky in the knees.

"I—I don't think I can walk to the Hall," he said, with a faint smile.

"We'll get a carriage," answered Pepper. "Maybe Mr. Darrison will let us have one. We'll pay for it, of course," he went on, knowing that the old farmer was a close person.

"I'll let you have my three-seated carriage and a team, if you want them," answered Amos Darrison. "But it will cost you two dollars. I can't afford to let you have 'em for nothing, because I'm a poor man, and taxes are heavy, and so many things wanted on the farm, and my wife wants——"

"Never mind, we'll pay the two dollars," interrupted Pepper. "Everybody who rides can chip in," he added to the surrounding cadets.

While the lads were waiting for the farmer to hook up his horses, some of them and Peleg Snuggers examined the carryall. A wheel had come off,

and the glass had been broken, but otherwise the turnout had suffered but little.

"I am glad it is no worse," said Andy. "I'd hate to see that old carryall put out of business. I've had so many nice rides in it."

"The axle will have to be mended before we can use it again," announced Peleg Snuggers. "We'll have to leave it here until the wheelwright can come fer it. I'll take the hosses back to the school."

"Look out that they don't run away with you," warned Pepper.

"Let me ride one of them!" cried the acrobatic Andy. "Give me the new one. I'll wager he won't get away from me."

"You'll break your neck!" answered the carryall driver.

"Not at all. Peleg, let me do it. I'm used to horses!" pleaded Andy.

Now, if the truth must be told, Peleg Snuggers did not relish taking the runaway team back to the school alone. He was a little afraid of the new horse, remembering how he had been kicked in the morning.

"Well, if you want to go, I'll let ye!" he said at last. "But, remember, 'tain't my fault if ye come back killed."

"Don't you worry; no horse will ever get the best of me," answered Andy.

A little later Amos Darrison brought out his three-seated carriage and all of the cadets but Andy got in. The baggage was left behind, the farmer promising to deliver it by wagon.

"See you later," cried Pepper to Andy. "Be careful!"

"Don't worry; we'll get there before you do," answered Andy.

Two blankets were arranged as saddles on the runaway team's backs and a few minutes later Andy and Peleg Snuggers started after the carriage.

"Let us catch up to them," cried the acrobatic youth, and urged his steed forward on a gallop.

"Be careful, I tell you!" cried the general utility man. "Be careful! He'll run away with you!"

But Andy was too light-hearted to pay heed to the warning, and soon he was well in advance of his companion. Then he sighted the carriage in the distance, and urged his horse to greater efforts.

"Whoop-la! Here we come!" he yelled, and set up a great shouting.

"It's Andy!" cried Pepper. "My, but he is riding some!"

"He always was a good one on horseback," said Fred.

"He wants to be careful; that horse is an ugly

one," came from Jack. "I heard a man at the dock say he wouldn't own the beast at any price."

Soon Andy ranged up beside the carriage.

"You're too slow for me!" he sang out merrily. "I'll have to go ahead and tell Captain Putnam you are coming."

He slapped the horse on the neck. Hardly had he done so when up came the animal's hind hoofs, almost unseating him. Then the horse made a mad leap forward and started down the highway at top speed.

"My, see him go!"

"He is running away!"

"Andy, look out for yourself!"

"If he throws you he'll kill you!"

So the cries rang out from the carriage as horse and rider sped over the highway leading to Putnam Hall.

Andy paid no attention to what was said. Of a sudden he had his hands full trying to keep on the horse's back. The steed was galloping along with a peculiar motion.

"Whoa! whoa, Jim!" yelled Andy, but Jim paid no attention. He was off for a run and did not care what happened.

The blanket had not been securely fastened and before long it commenced to slip towards the horse's tail. Andy tried to haul it back. His

efforts were but partly successful, and with an end of the blanket trailing around one of his hind legs, the steed became more unmanageable than ever.

On and on went horse and rider, until, in the distance, Putnam Hall loomed up. On one side of the highway were the woods lining the lake shore; on the other the broad campus leading to the school and other buildings.

"He'll slow up now," thought Andy. "Unless he bolts right into his stable. If he tries that I'll have to jump for it."

In front of the school building the roadway widened out into several curves. Andy thought Jim would take to one of the curves, but he was mistaken. On kept the steed, directly past the institution of learning.

On the campus were a score or more of cadets, who stared in amazement at the sight of the runaway horse with the boy clinging desperately to his back.

"It's Andy Snow!" cried Henry Lee, the captain of Company A.

"So it is," responded Bob Grenwood, the quartermaster of the school battalion. "How in the world did he get on that horse?"

"It's the one that was hitched to the carryall,"

put in Billy Sabine, another cadet. "Something is wrong."

"Let's tell Captain Putnam," said another.

"Whoa! whoa!" yelled Andy, frantically, when he realized that the horse was not going to pass into the grounds. "Whoa, I say! You've gone far enough!"

The only effect his words had was to make Jim travel a little faster. Away they went, past the gymnasium and the stables and then along the country road leading to the farms back of the lake.

"Well, if you won't stop, go on," said Andy, presently. "You'll get tired sooner or later, old man. But, remember, you've got to bring me back, no matter how tired you are."

A good half-mile was covered, and then horse and rider reached a sharp turn in the highway. Here the trees were thick and some of the branches hung low.

Andy bent down that he might avoid the branches. But he did not get quite low enough. He looked ahead, saw a man standing on one side of the roadway staring in astonishment at him, and the next instant he found himself caught by the throat in a tree-limb and carried off the horse. Then Jim bounded on riderless, and poor Andy, kicking and thrashing wildly, swung free of the

tree-limb and landed on his shoulder in the roadway.

The man who had seen him coming leaped to one side, and just in the nick of time, for the runaway horse passed within a foot of him. The man gasped in astonishment, and for several seconds did not know apparently what to do.

"Looks like he was killed," the man muttered to himself, as he took a few steps forward. Andy had rolled over on his back and lay stretched out, with his eyes closed, very much as poor Jack had been stretched out only a short while before.

The man looked up and down the roadway and saw that nobody else was in sight, that part of the highway being but little traveled. Then he came closer to the unconscious boy and bent over him.

"Only stunned, I reckon!" he muttered to himself. "Wonder if he belongs around here?"

As the man bent over Andy he saw the lad's watch dangling from its chain, fastened to a buttonhole of the youth's vest. Then his ferret-like eyes caught sight of a fine ruby pin in Andy's necktie.

"He could easily lose that watch on the road, riding like that, and the pin, too," he muttered to himself. "It's a fine chance to make a little haul!"

He straightened up and took another look around. Not a soul was in sight. With dexterous

fingers he unfastened the watch and chain and transferred them to his pocket. The stickpin followed. Then he slipped his hand into a vest-pocket and brought out a five-dollar bill and three one-dollar bills.

"Eight dollars!" he muttered. "Not so bad but what it might be worse. I reckon the watch, chain and pin will bring me another twenty or thirty. Sparrow, you are in luck to-day."

He lingered, wondering if Andy had anything more of value about him. The youth wore a ring with a cameo in it, but it looked tight and hard to get off.

"Might try his other pockets," mused the thief. Then a distant shouting came to his ears.

"Somebody is after him," he muttered. "I reckon it's time I cleared out. It won't do for me to be seen in this neighborhood."

He looked around for an instant. Then he walked to the roadside, ran in among the trees and bushes, and disappeared from view.

CHAPTER IV

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

"Hello, Pepper!"

"How are you, Fred?"

"My, here's the old bunch back again!"

"Well, Henry, did you have a good time during the summer?"

"How about that trip out West, Bob? Did you kill any bears or Indians?"

"Getting high-toned, hiring a carriage to bring you."

So the cries rang out, as the three-seated carriage driven by Amos Darrison rolled up to the front of Putnam Hall. A crowd of cadets had rushed forward to greet the newcomers.

"Where is Andy Snow?" asked Pepper, as he leaped to the ground.

"He went past on horseback like a streak!" cried Bob Grenwood. "Some of the fellows just went off to tell Captain Putnam about it. What did it mean?"

"Tell you later, Bob. Just now somebody had better go after Andy. That horse was running away with him."

A hubbub arose, in the midst of which Captain Putnam, the owner of the school, appeared. He was a fine-looking gentleman, with a face that was at once kindly and firm.

"What is this I hear about Andrew Snow?" he said anxiously. "A horse ran away with him?"

In as few words as possible Pepper and some of the others related the particulars of what had happened to the carryall. Just as they were finishing, Peleg Snuggers came up on the other horse.

"This is very unfortunate!" murmured Captain Putnam. "We'll have to follow poor Snow at once. Mr. Darrison, will you drive me?"

"Why—er—yes, but it will take time, Captain Putnam, an' my wife wants me to——"

"I'll pay you for your time, sir," interrupted the owner of the school quickly.

"Yes, sir; all right, sir. Jump in an' we'll go right after the runaway."

"Can I go along?" asked Pepper.

"I'd like to go, too," came from Stuffer Singleton.

"So would I," added Bob Grenwood.

"Very well, you three cadets can go along," replied the captain. "It is possible you may be

needed—if poor Snow has been hurt." He turned to Jack. "How do you feel, Major Ruddy?"

"Oh, I guess I'll be all right after I have rested up," answered Jack, with a faint smile.

"You have a cut on the forehead."

"Yes, sir, but it doesn't hurt like it did."

"Better bathe it with warm water and put something on it," said Captain Putnam, and then leaped into the carriage, and Pepper, Stuffer and Bob followed.

"Hope they find Andy all right," said Joe Nelson, as the turnout moved off in the direction the runaway had taken.

"Yes, it would be too bad if Andy was seriously injured," answered the young major. "Come on, I'm going in and wash up and put some witch hazel on my forehead."

"Glad to see you, young gentlemen," said a pleasant voice, when the newcomers entered the school building, and George Strong, the second assistant teacher, stepped forward to shake each by the hand. "I hope you all had a nice time this summer." And then he asked about the broken-down carryall and looked at Jack's wound.

Although he did not say so to his chums, Jack was glad enough to get upstairs to his dormitory and rest. The room was a large one and was occupied not only by the young major but also by

Pepper, Andy and several others. While some of the boys busied themselves in arranging their things, Jack rested in an easy chair near the window.

"Quite a few new fellows here this term," said Fred, who was present. "I understand that all of the new dormitories that were built in the wing this summer will be filled up."

"That shows the school is growing popular," answered the young major.

"Jack, aren't you afraid somebody will try to get your position away from you?" went on Fred.

"What do you mean, Fred? Try to be elected major?"

"Yes."

"Well, some of the fellows deserve the position. Bart Connors, the captain of Company B, would make a fine major, and so would Henry Lee, the captain of Company A. And Sergeant Dave Kearney is a good fellow who deserves promotion."

"Then you don't care so much for the position?"

"Oh, yes, I do care. But I realize that it isn't fair to be major all the time. I'm willing to step down and give the other fellows a show."

"But not a fellow like Reff Ritter, or that Dan Baxter you told me about."

"No, I couldn't stand for those chaps."

"Reff is as sore as he can be over what happened last term."

"I know it."

"Dale says he knows something about Reff."

"I do," came from Dale Blackmore, who had entered a moment before. "Do you know, in one way I am sorry for Ritter," he added.

"What is it you know?" asked Fred.

"I don't suppose I ought to speak about it, but it is bound to get out sooner or later. It seems Mr. Ritter, Reff's father, was a rich stock broker and promoter of various mining companies. Well, this summer he got himself tangled up in some mining companies that were trying to make money too fast. As a consequence he lost the most of his wealth, and some folks who had bought mining stock from him came close to having him arrested for fraud. It was that state of affairs that made Reff give up his trip to the Adirondacks and go home. I got it from some close friends that the Ritters were almost cleaned out, and that Mr. Ritter wanted Reff to give up school and go to work. But Mrs. Ritter was too proud and insisted that Reff be returned to Putnam Hall. So he is back."

"Well, that certainly is hard luck," returned Fred. "I wonder if Coulter and Paxton will stick to him, now he is poor? My notion of it was,

Coulter stuck to him mainly for what he could get out of it, he not having much spending money of his own."

"Well, I shan't throw it up to Reff that he is poor," said Jack, quickly. "All he has got to do is to behave himself and I'll treat him as well as anybody." And then the young major left the dormitory, to bathe his head in the bathroom, and wash up generally.

In the meantime those in the carriage had driven along the country road until they came upon the unconscious form of Andy. All leaped out and gathered around while Captain Putnam made an examination.

"He has had a bad fall," said the master of the school. "But I doubt if any bones are broken."

They raised the sufferer up, and presently Andy stirred and opened his eyes.

"Whoa!" he murmured. "Whoa!"

"He must think he is still on horseback!" cried Pepper, and but for Andy's pale face he would have laughed outright.

"Snow, are you hurt much?" asked Captain Putnam, kindly. "The horse is gone. You are safe."

"Oh!" gasped poor Andy, and then he stared around in bewilderment. "I—I was hung up in the—the tree, wasn't I?"

"If you were, you must have dropped down," answered Bob Grenwood.

"Yes. I remember now. I got caught by the throat and then I dropped—and that's all I know. Where is the horse?"

"Went on, I guess," answered Stuffer Singleton. "He was streaking it like an Indian when you passed the Hall."

"Shall we help you to get up?" asked Captain Putnam.

"I—I suppose so," faltered Andy. "Oh, dear, but I'm weak!" he added, as he tried to rise.

"Let us carry him to the carriage," suggested Pepper, and this was done, and he was made as comfortable on the cushions as possible.

"I wonder did anybody catch the horse?" asked the acrobatic youth, as the turnout was on its way to Putnam Hall.

"I don't know. I'll find out after you have been taken care of," answered Captain Putnam. "You cadets are certainly arriving this term in an unusual manner," he added grimly.

"You can lay the whole trouble at the door of some Pornell students," returned Pepper. "They pelted us with soft apples and other things and that started the team to running away. If it hadn't been for them we would have come to the school in the carryall all safe and sound."

"I shall investigate," answered Captain Putnam, briefly.

"Hello!" cried Pepper, a moment later. He was gazing at Andy's clothing. "Weren't you wearing a watch and a stickpin?"

"Of course," replied the sufferer. He put up his hands and felt around. "Both gone, I declare!"

"Did they jounce off when you were riding?" asked Stuffer.

"They must have! Oh, this is the worst yet!"

"Did you lose anything else?" questioned the young quartermaster.

"I don't know." Andy felt in his pockets. "Yes, my money is gone—eight dollars in bills!"

"Where did you have the bills?" asked Captain Putnam.

"In this vest-pocket. It must have jounced out during the hard riding. Oh, what luck! Captain, I'll have to go back and look for my property."

"You are in no condition, Snow, to do that."

"I'll go back," said Pepper. "Stuffer and Bob, will you go along?"

"Sure thing!" cried Stuffer.

"And if we can't find your things where you fell we'll look along the road all the way back to the Hall," added the young quartermaster.

"Thank you," answered Andy, and then, feeling

a curious fainting spell coming over him, he laid back on the cushions and closed his eyes.

The three cadets sprang from the carriage and made their way back to the spot where Andy had been found. They made a thorough search, but, of course, failed to find any of the acrobatic youth's belongings.

"He must have lost them farther back," said Pepper. "Let us look with care as we walk along."

This they did, but arrived at the school without finding anything but a coat-button and a yellow lead pencil. Then they walked past the school in the direction of Cedarville.

"Might as well give it up," said Bob. "It's getting too dark to see very good, anyway."

"Yes, and I'm getting dead hungry," added Stuffer.

"Was there ever a time when you weren't hungry?" asked Pepper, with a grin.

"Aw, now, quit it," cried the lad who had a reputation as an eater. "Don't start so early in the term."

"I must confess I'm a bit hungry myself," said the young quartermaster. "I had an early dinner."

When they got back to the school they learned that Andy had been put to bed and that a doctor had been summoned. The acrobatic youth had

been much shaken up and it was thought best to make him keep quiet for a few days.

"Better not say anything about his loss for the present," advised Captain Putnam. "I will have a man sent out to make another search."

The accidents to Andy and to Major Jack put something of a damper on the arrival for the term, and a jollification that had been scheduled for that night was indefinitely postponed. Captain Putnam questioned the cadets concerning the actions of Roy Bock and his cronies, and then sent a stiff letter to the head of Pornell Academy.

When Reff Ritter heard about the accidents he shrugged his shoulders and tossed his head.

"That's what they get for crowding us out of the carryall," he said to Coulter and Paxton, who roomed with him.

"Yes, and it serves 'em right," grumbled Coulter.

"That's what!" chimed in Paxton.

CHAPTER V

THE FIGHT IN THE GYMNASIUM

It was not until two days later that Andy Snow felt like himself again. No bones had been broken, but the acrobatic youth had received a shaking up that was severe.

So far he had not been told of his loss, and when he asked for his belongings he was much depressed by the news.

"Couldn't find them anywhere?" he repeated, to Pepper. "Oh, are you sure you made a good search?"

"We certainly did, Andy," returned Pepper. "We went back the next day, early in the morning."

"And you didn't find a thing?"

"Only this button and lead pencil, and this buckle."

"The pencil is mine, but not the button and the buckle." Andy heaved a sigh. "Then I am

out my watch and chain, the stickpin, and eight dollars! Was there ever such luck!"

"Andy, was anybody near you when you had the tumble?" asked Pepper.

"Near me? Why, yes, there was a man on the road just ahead of me! I had forgotten all about it until now."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. A tall fellow, with a thin, leathery face."

"A farmer?"

"No, he looked more like a city man. He had on a regular sack suit and a derby hat."

"I was thinking that possibly somebody robbed you while you were unconscious."

"Perhaps that is so, Pep. I'd like to see that man."

"You never saw him before?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Would you know him if you saw him again?"

"I don't know about that. I didn't have much time to look at him. I was busy trying to escape being hit by the tree branches."

"You must have been lying on the road five or ten minutes before we found you," pursued Pepper. "If that stranger was a rascal he would have had plenty of time to go through your

pockets. I don't see how riding could make you lose all those things at once."

"If he robbed me, I'd like to get hold of him," cried Andy.

"More than likely, if he did rob you, he'll take good care to keep out of your reach."

"What of the horse? Did they catch him?"

"Not yet. Most likely he left the road after he got tired of running and wandered into the woods. He was a valuable animal and Captain Putnam is worried about him."

"Will he hold me for that loss?"

"I don't think so—you didn't run away with him—he ran away with you."

The report of the loss of Andy's valuables was thoroughly circulated around Putnam Hall and Cedarville, and a reward of ten dollars for the return of the things was posted.

The next day a farmer named John Lane, who lived not far from the school, appeared there, riding on the back of the runaway Jim. The horse looked much subdued and was covered with burrs.

"I was out in the woods with my son Bill, when we ran across the horse," explained John Lane. "I knew him right away as the animal that had belonged to Jerry Toller. I asked Jerry about it

and he said he had sold the horse to you, so I brought him here."

"You are very kind, Mr. Lane," replied Captain Putnam. "I'd like to pay you for your trouble."

"Oh, that's all right, Captain Putnam," responded the farmer. "Glad to do you a good turn."

"Thank you very much. Any time I can do you a good turn, let me know."

"Well, you might buy some of my extra hay, and extra potatoes. I've got some prime hay, and the best potatoes ever grown in these parts, and I'll sell 'em at regular market prices."

"Then I'll take all I can use, Mr. Lane," answered the captain, and a little later a bargain was struck, not alone for the hay and potatoes, but also for some turnips, cabbages, and table celery.

"What that horse needs is exercise," said John Lane, on departing. "Give him a few miles every day and he'll be as mild as any of 'em. He's too full-blooded to remain standing in the stable."

"I'll see to it that he gets the exercise," answered Captain Putnam.

On the day that the horse was returned Jack, Pepper and Fred walked down to the boathouse, to look over the boats. As my old readers know, Jack owned a sloop called the *Alice,* while Fred pos-

sessed a similar craft named the *Ajax*. Besides these sloops, there were numerous boats belonging to the Hall.

"Well, our sloops look natural," said the young major.

"I was wishing this summer I could go out in the *Ajax*," answered Fred. "What do you say if we take a little sail now?"

"In which boat, Fred?" asked Pepper. "We can't go out in both."

"Make it the *Alice!*" cried Jack.

"No, the *Ajax!*" came from Fred.

"I'll toss up for it," went on Pepper and produced a cent. "Head you win, tail you lose." And up into the air spun the coin.

"Head!" cried Fred.

"Head it is, and we go out in the *Ajax*."

"All right, but you'll have to go out in the *Alice* next time," cried the young major.

"By the way, did you hear about Tom Rollinson?" asked Pepper, as he walked into the boathouse to inspect his locker there.

"What of him?" asked Fred.

"The family were burnt out this summer and lost everything."

"Lost everything?" queried Jack. "That's tough luck. I shouldn't want to lose all I had."

"Well, it will happen sometimes," said Fred.

"Well, some lose by fire and some lose in other ways," went on the young major. "You have heard about Ritter. His father——"

"You shut your mouth about my father!" roared a voice from behind a dressing-room door. "My father is just as honest as anybody, and I won't have you or anybody else running him down!" And then Reff Ritter appeared, minus his coat, vest and collar, and his face distorted with rage.

"I didn't say your father was dishonest, Reff," returned Jack, as calmly as he could. "I was simply going to state——"

"Oh, you needn't try to smooth it over, Jack Ruddy," fumed the bully. "Don't imagine that I don't know all about the mean stories you and others are circulating about my family. You'd like to make out that my father is the worst swindler that ever lived, and I won't stand for it."

"Reff, that isn't true," interrupted Pepper. "Jack hasn't said a word against your father."

"Oh, you can't bluff me, Pep Ditmore. I know better."

"What Pepper says is true—I haven't said a word, Reff, truly I haven't. I heard that you had lost some of your money, and I said I was sorry to hear it—and I am sorry. I know how I'd feel if my father lost money. You——"

"Don't smooth it over, I tell you!" roared the bully. "I know you! You and your cronies have been down on me ever since I came to this school, and now you think you can crow over me, and maybe get me to leave Putnam Hall. But I am not going to leave, and if you dare to open your mouth against me I'll punch your head."

"You'll not punch my head, Reff!" answered Jack, and now his tones grew stern. "If you don't want to believe me, you needn't. But I'll not let you threaten me."

"Humph! You can't boss me, even if you are major of the battalion."

"I don't want to 'boss' anybody. You behave yourself and leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone."

The loud talking had attracted the attention of a number of cadets, and they commenced to crowd around Jack and Ritter. Among the number were Gus Coulter and Nick Paxton.

"Why don't you fight him, Reff?" suggested Coulter.

"That's the talk," added Paxton. "Show him that he can't talk about you and your father as he pleases."

"He won't fight; he is afraid," answered Reff Ritter, with a sneer in his tones.

"I am not afraid, Ritter, and you know it,"

answered Jack, trying to keep his temper. "But you know the rules, and I, as major of the cadets, am bound to uphold them."

"Hit him one!" whispered Coulter, in his crony's ear. "I'll stand by you."

"So will I," added Paxton.

"Well, if you won't fight, take that for your impudence!" cried Reff Ritter, and with a quick step forward, he slapped Jack on the cheek.

The blow was but a light one, yet it seemed to sink deep into Jack's very heart, and on the instant all thoughts of prudence and rules were cast aside. His face went white and his eyes flashed fire. Reff Ritter stepped back to guard himself, but before he could do so, Jack's arm shot out and a heavy blow landed on the bully's chin, sending him staggering into Coulter's arms.

"That's the way to do it, Jack!" came from Pepper.

"He started it, now give him what he deserves!" added Fred.

"That's for the slap in the face, Reff Ritter!" said Jack, in cold tones. "Now mind and keep your distance."

"Wait—I'm not done yet!" yelled the bully, and doubling up his fists he hurled himself on the young major.

Several body blows were struck and then the

two clinched. As Ritter was partly stripped for battle, while Jack had on his stiff uniform, the bully had a little the better of it from the beginning. Around and around the gymnasium floor they struggled.

"Break away!" cried several cadets. "Break away!"

"I'll break if he will," answered Jack.

"All right," answered Ritter, and the hold of each youth was loosened. But as they broke the bully tried to land his fist on Jack's ear.

"Hi, that isn't fair, Ritter!" cried Fred.

"You keep out of this, Century!" was Coulter's warning.

"I'll not keep out, Coulter. Make Ritter fight fair."

Again the two cadets faced each other. Now Ritter was on his guard, and cleverly ducked a blow aimed at his face. Then he hit Jack on the chest and in the shoulder.

"That's the talk," came gleefully from Paxton. "Pummel him well while you are at it."

Again Jack struck out, and this time landed on the bully's arm. But then Ritter swung a heavy left-hander that took the young major in the ear and sent him staggering against Pepper.

"Follow him up! Follow him up!" screamed

Coulter. "You've got him going, Reff! Finish him!"

Thus encouraged, Ritter leaped in and another blow landed on Jack's ear. He was a bit dazed, but shut his teeth hard and ducked under Ritter's arm. Then both sparred for an opening, circling around the gymnasium floor once more, the crowd of cadets around them growing larger and larger.

"It's a great fight, all right!"

"Say, I hope none of the teachers come to cut it short."

"They are about evenly matched, aren't they?"

"I don't know; we'll soon find out."

So the talk ran on, but to it neither Jack nor Ritter paid attention. The bully was in a fierce rage, while Jack tried his best to keep cool. Suddenly Ritter leaped forward and two quick blows were delivered.

Jack knocked one blow aside and dodged the second. Then he let drive, right and left, as quick as lightning and with all his strength. One blow took the bully in the nose and the second in the mouth. Over he went against one of the wooden horses. Then his eyes suddenly closed, and in a limp mass he slid to the floor.

CHAPTER VI

CAPTAIN PUTNAM INVESTIGATES

"Reff Ritter has been knocked out!"

"My, what blows they were!"

"Well, he brought it on himself," said Pepper.

"That's what," added Fred. "He struck Jack after Jack told him he didn't believe in fighting."

"He couldn't save himself because he was too close to the wooden horse," came from Coulter, who felt bound to stick up for his crony. "It wasn't fair to run him up against the horse."

"Coulter, a poor excuse is worse than none," answered Dale.

"Ritter was knocked out fair and square," came from Bart Connors.

While the talking was going on, Paxton had rushed off for water. Now he returned with a pailful and a sponge, and commenced to bathe the fallen one's face. Ritter soon opened his eyes and gave a groan.

"Le—let me al—alone," he muttered.

"Get up, Reff," said Paxton. "Go for him again."

"I—I can't," mumbled the bully, and now it was seen that two of his front teeth were loose. He stared around in a helpless fashion. Paxton put some more water on his face.

"Has he had enough?" demanded Jack, stepping up.

"You go away," answered Coulter, surlily.

"You wouldn't hit him when he's down, would you?" snapped Paxton.

"I asked you if he had enough. If he has, I'm going for a sail."

"I'll—I'll finish this some other time," mumbled Ritter, as he glared at the young major.

"No, Ritter, you'll finish it now if you finish it at all," answered Jack, coldly. "You started this fight, and now you must take the consequences. Get up, if you want to go at it again."

"I don't want to fight—now."

"Then you acknowledge yourself beaten?"

"No, I don't."

"Then get up. I don't want to wait here all afternoon for you."

"He has all he wants," said Pepper. "He won't get up."

"It's your fight, Ruddy," cried Joe Nelson.

"So it is," put in half a dozen cadets.

"Ritter is beaten and he knows it," added Harry Blossom, the first lieutenant of Company A.

"I—er—I won't fight any more now," mumbled the bully. He got up slowly and then, staggering to a bench, sank down heavily upon it. Evidently his punishment at Jack's hands had been heavy.

"Boys! Boys! what is the meaning of this?"

It was a loud and harsh voice from the doorway of the gymnasium that startled all of the assembled cadets. The next instant Josiah Crabtree, the head teacher, strode in.

"Skip, Jack, here is old Crabtree!"

"Run for it, Reff!"

"I demand to know what is going on here?" went on Josiah Crabtree, in his high-pitched voice. "Who is fighting?"

There was no reply. The assembled cadets looked at each other. No one felt like saying a word.

"Ritter, have you been fighting?" went on the head teacher, noticing the bully's condition.

"I was—er—that is, Ruddy attacked me, and I—er—I defended myself," stammered the defeated one.

"Ruddy? Do you mean Major Ruddy?" questioned Josiah Crabtree, in astonishment.

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Crabtree, what Ritter says is untrue!" burst out Jack. "He hit me first."

"But you have been fighting? You, the major of the school battalion! Disgraceful!"

"Wouldn't you fight if somebody slapped you in the face?" demanded Jack, hotly.

"You know the rules, Ruddy—and as major you ought to be the first to obey them."

"I am willing to do that, sir. But I won't allow anybody to slap me in the face."

"I didn't slap him," put in Ritter.

"Yes, you did," came from Pepper.

"It is true—I saw it," added Fred.

"So did I," added a cadet named Brown.

"If you were struck, Major Ruddy, it was your duty to report the occurrence at the office," said Josiah Crabtree, loftily. "Such actions as these will most likely cost you your command."

"Oh, what a shame!" burst out Pepper.

"Ditmore, I want no words from you!" roared the head teacher, savagely.

"But it wouldn't be fair to make Jack suffer for something like that," went on Pepper, bound to stick up for his chum.

"Ha! you dare to talk back to me, Ditmore! Go to your room at once, and stay there until to-morrow morning."

"But, Mr. Crabtree——"

"Not another word. Go to your room. And you, Ruddy and Ritter, report to me and to Captain Putnam at the private office at once."

There was no help for it, and with an angry look on his face, Pepper left the gymnasium and walked over to the school building.

"I'll report as soon as I have washed up, Mr. Crabtree," said Ritter, sullenly.

"So will I," added Jack.

"I'll give you both ten minutes, no more!" snapped the teacher, and then he strode from the gymnasium as swiftly as he had entered it.

As soon as Josiah Crabtree had departed a lively discussion commenced between the followers of the young major and of Reff Ritter. Only a few had seen the start of the quarrel and knew that it had been provoked entirely by the bully.

"I'm afraid I am in for it," said Jack, dismally, to Fred. "Ritter will do his best to make out that it was all my fault."

"Well, I can testify that Ritter hit you first, and Pepper and Brown can do so, too," answered Fred.

"Reff will get Coulter and Paxton to back him up."

"But they weren't on hand when the quarrel started."

"That is true—but they'll stick up for Reff, see if they don't."

"I sincerely trust that Captain Putnam doesn't take away your majorship, Jack."

"If he does that, I'll—well, never mind what I'll do."

"If he did it to me, I'd feel like leaving."

"I was going to say that. But I'll not do anything hastily," answered the young major, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Want me to go along?"

"No, since Crabtree didn't ask any one. But I wish you'd hang around, so I can call on you."

"I'll go to the library."

"All right—and take Brown, if he'll go."

Jack washed up and brushed his uniform, and then made his way to Captain Putnam's private office. He found that Reff Ritter had hurried and gotten ahead of him, and was telling his story, both to the head of the school and to the first assistant teacher. Ritter's mouth, nose and one eye were swollen, and he looked anything but happy.

"You may remain in the hallway until I call you, Major Ruddy," said Captain Putnam, when Jack appeared, and the young major had to go outside, closing the door after him.

The telling of Reff Ritter's story took some time,

and he was asked several questions by Captain Putnam and Josiah Crabtree. He said that he had just been getting ready to take some gymnastic exercise when Jack and some of his chums had come in and begun to talk about his father, saying that they had heard he was dishonest.

"Ruddy said he knew my father was dishonest," went on Reff Ritter. "That made me mad and I ran out of the dressing-room and told him he ought to be ashamed of himself, that my father was as honest as anybody. Then he got on his high-horse and told me to shut up or he would knock me down. I told him it was a shame for him to speak so of my father. Then he got mad and all of a sudden he jumped at me and hit me in the mouth and the eye and then in the nose. Then I went for him, and we had it hot and heavy, until we bumped into one of the wooden horses and I went down. He tried to hit me after I was down, but Coulter and Paxton hauled him back. Then Mr. Crabtree came in."

"A most disgraceful proceeding!" cried Josiah Crabtree. "And evidently Major Ruddy's fault entirely.

"You are quite sure Ruddy started the quarrel?" questioned Captain Putnam, gravely.

"Yes, sir."

"And he told the other cadets that your father was dishonest?"

"Yes, sir. That is what made me so mad. But I didn't hit him until he attacked me," added Ritter, hastily.

"Who was present at the time?"

"Pepper Ditmore and Fred Century were with Ruddy, and Gus Coulter and Nick Paxton were with me."

"Anybody else?"

"I didn't see anybody."

"You got the worst of the fight."

"Yes, sir. You see, he took me unawares. I guess I could whip him if we were to meet on equal terms," added Ritter.

"You may retire to the next room, Ritter, while I question Major Ruddy."

"Don't you believe me?" cried the bully, in alarm.

"One side of a story is only one side," answered Captain Putnam, non-committally.

"I believe Ritter tells the truth," put in Josiah Crabtree. "When I appeared Ruddy was very insolent and so was Ditmore. I sent Ditmore to his room as a punishment."

"You may call Ruddy in," answered the head of the school, briefly. He understood Josiah Crabtree's dictatorial manner perfectly, and he only

retained the man because of his unusual ability as a teacher.

Jack came in and was told to sit down in the chair Ritter had just vacated. Then Captain Putnam asked him to tell his story, and he related everything just as it had occurred.

"Are you quite sure that you have told the plain truth, Major Ruddy?" asked Captain Putnam, after he had finished.

"Yes, sir," answered Jack, and looked the head of the school fairly and squarely in the face.

"Your story does not agree with that told by Ritter."

"I believe Ritter," broke in Josiah Crabtree. "It was an outrage to drag in the boy's father simply because he has made some—er—unfortunate speculations. If I were you, Captain Putnam——"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Crabtree," interrupted the owner of the Hall. "I am conducting this investigation. Now that we have heard the stories of the principals we'll hear what the witnesses have to say."

"Fred Century was there, and he is in the library now," said Jack. "Pepper Ditmore was there, too, but Mr. Crabtree sent him to his room."

"I will question Century and Ditmore, and also Coulter and Paxton," answered Captain Putnam.

"You may retire to Classroom Three, Major Ruddy, until called."

Jack bowed and withdrew and walked to the classroom named. It was empty and he threw himself down on a seat and gave himself up to his reflections.

Fred was next called, and he was followed by Pepper. Both told practically the story related by Jack. In the meantime George Strong, the second assistant teacher, was sent off to summon Coulter and Paxton. He was gone the best part of a quarter of an hour, and when he came back his face was a study.

"Captain Putnam, I have just made a discovery," he said. "I would like to speak to you alone."

"Alone?" queried the head of the school, somewhat astonished.

"Yes, sir, alone."

"Very well, then, come into the next room," answered Captain Putnam.

CHAPTER VII

PEPPER MAKES A DISCOVERY

"You do not—er—wish me present?" came rather awkwardly from Josiah Crabtree.

"Oh, that won't matter, Mr. Crabtree," answered George Strong. "I did not desire any of the cadets present, that was all."

"I do not care to intrude——" commenced the dictatorial teacher.

"As you please," answered Mr. Strong, with a shrug of his shoulders.

At first Josiah Crabtree was inclined to stand on his dignity and walk off, but his curiosity got the better of him and he followed Captain Putnam and George Strong into another office.

"I went after Coulter and Paxton, as you directed me," said the second assistant teacher, when they were alone, and the door had been closed. "At first I could not find them, but at last I located Paxton and then Coulter. Where do you suppose they were?"

"I have no idea," answered Captain Putnam.

"Paxton was under the window of the office, listening to all that was going on. He was partly hidden behind a bush, so that nobody might see him."

"Indeed! That is not to his credit. And Coulter?"

"Coulter was at another window, talking to Ritter. Ritter was giving him some instructions, and as I came up unnoticed I heard Ritter say, 'Now, don't make a mess of it. Tell the story just as I told it, and be sure to stick to it that Ruddy hit me first, and tell Nick to stick to that, too.' Those were his very words."

"Is it possible! And what did Coulter say?"

"He promised to tell the story as Ritter wanted it, and said he would tell Paxton also to say that Ruddy struck the first blow."

"Then he virtually admitted that he struck the first blow himself."

"I should judge so, from his talk."

"Major Ruddy say he did."

"But Ruddy insulted him by talking of Mr. Ritter's losses——" began Josiah Crabtree.

"We'll look into that, Mr. Crabtree. Is that all, Mr. Strong?"

"No, I waited until Coulter joined Paxton. The two walked out on the campus, so I didn't

catch what they said. I told them to follow me, and they are now out in the hall."

"I will listen to what each of them has to say—and then I will examine Century and Ditmore again."

Coulter was called into the main office and asked a great number of questions. Captain Putnam was very stern, and soon had the cadet badly twisted in his statements. Then Paxton was told to come in, and on being questioned he became more confused even than Coulter. Then both were confronted by George Strong, and at last they virtually admitted that Ritter had struck the first blow, and that they knew nothing of the quarrel previous to that time.

"You may go," said Captain Putnam, at length. "Your efforts to shield Ritter do you no credit." And Coulter and Paxton slunk out of the office silently and much worried over the thought of what punishment they might receive for trying to deceive the master of the Hall.

After that Pepper and Fred were again interviewed and cross-questioned. But they stuck to their original story, and as that was the story told by Jack, Captain Putnam felt that it must be true.

"You may go," said the captain, presently.

"Have I got to go back to the dormitory?" queried Pepper.

"No, you may join the other cadets," answered the head of the school.

"But, sir——" commenced Josiah Crabtree.

"I do not see as he merits punishment, Mr. Crabtree," said the captain, coldly. "We will let it pass." And he spoke so firmly that the dictatorial teacher said no more on the subject.

When Jack was again called into the presence of the teachers it must be admitted that he was a good deal worried. There was a strict rule at Putnam Hall against fighting, and that rule had been violated by him. Yet he felt he had been justified.

"Major Ruddy, I have examined several witnesses to this affair and I find that your story of the occurrence is substantially correct," began the head of the school. "Ritter struck the first blow."

"He did. He slapped me in the face. That angered me so greatly that I pitched into him without thinking twice. It was all done in a few seconds. But I guess I'd do it again," added Jack. "I wouldn't let anybody slap me without getting back at him. I guess if I did that I'd make a mighty poor soldier."

At these words Captain Putnam's face became a study. He had been on the point of reading Jack a stern lecture on the disgrace of breaking the school rules, but now he paused. When at West

Point a certain upper classman had once pulled his nose and, regardless of consequences, he had knocked the fellow down and dragged him by the heels through the dirt of the road. He had considered himself justified in his actions, and his whole class has stood by him. That being so, he did not have it in his heart to punish Jack, or even to find fault with him. Yet the discipline of the school must be maintained.

"Major Ruddy, do you know what the first duty of a soldier is?" he asked, but his voice was soft and easy.

"Yes, sir; to obey orders."

"Exactly."

"But there is no rule about what to do if a fellow slaps your face," added Jack, quickly.

"That is true." Captain Putnam had to turn away to conceal a sudden smile. "And, in one way, let me say I do not blame you for what you did, especially as you acted on the spur of the moment. But fighting must stop. If I dismiss this case against you, will you promise to leave Ritter alone in the future?"

"I will if he leaves me alone. If he attacks me, I'll defend myself to the best of my ability."

"He won't attack you—I'll see to that," answered the captain, grimly. "You may go. But remember, no more fighting."

"Thank you, sir," answered Jack, and lost no time in leaving the office.

"Well, how did you make out?" questioned Pepper, eagerly, when Jack joined him on the campus.

"Case dismissed, Pep."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Hurrah! That's the best news yet. I was in fear that you would at least be cut off from your holidays."

"What about Ritter?" asked Fred.

"I don't know what Captain Putnam is going to do with him."

The fight and the doings in the office had put Jack out of the notion of taking a sail, and the crowd of boys took a walk instead, that lasted until it was time for the evening parade.

"Wonder if Ritter will show up for drill?" came from Dale.

"We'll know soon," answered Jack.

In a few minutes the drums commenced to roll and out on the parade ground poured the cadets and their officers. Jack had buckled on his sword, and so had Henry Lee and Bart Conners. The cadets had their guns, that is all but the band, who carried their drums and fifes, and the color ser-

geants, who carried Old Glory and the Putnam Hall banner.

"Battalion, attention!" came firmly from Major Jack Ruddy, and all the young soldiers stiffened up in their places.

He ran his eyes over the two companies, to see that every cadet was "toeing the mark." He did not see Reff Ritter.

"Present arms! Carry arms! Shoulder arms!" came the various commands, and the cadets made the movements with their guns. The drilling was so well done that Captain Putnam, who always looked on, nodded in approval.

"By column of fours, forward march!" came the next command, and then the drums struck up once more, the fifes joined in, and four abreast the cadets moved off, down the parade ground. They marched up and down several times, and executed various movements, and then marched into the mess hall, or dining-room, put away their guns, and took their seats.

"Ritter isn't here," whispered Pepper to Jack.

"So I see," was the reply.

"I'll bet he caught it from Captain Putnam," put in Dale.

"Silence at the table!" came harshly from Josiah Crabtree. "I want less talking at meals!"

"My, but he's a cheerful beggar!" muttered Dale.

"Imagine him at the head of the school," observed Pepper.

"Ditmore, did you hear me?" snarled the teacher. "I want you to keep quiet."

"All right, Mr. Crabtree; sorry I spoke," answered The Imp, cheerfully.

"Then remember to keep your mouth closed after this."

"Ahem! how am I to eat if I keep my mouth closed?" asked Pepper, innocently.

"Ha! I want none of your jokes, Ditmore! Leave the table!" thundered Josiah Crabtree.

"I'm not through yet."

"Never mind, leave the table at once!" And the teacher glared at Pepper as if to eat him up.

"Just my luck!" muttered The Imp, and got up.

"Here's a sandwich for you," whispered Dale, who sat near, and he passed over two slices of bread with some cold meat between.

"And here's a piece of cake," added Jack, and slid it along, under the edge of the table. Then Pepper got up and left the room. He did not know where to go and so walked slowly in the direction of the boathouse.

As he neared the building, he saw a boy come out of the structure and hurry across the float to

where the *Alice* and the *Ajax* were tied up. The boy was Reff Ritter.

The bully of the school was in a great rage. Captain Putnam had given him a stern lecture and told him if he did not behave in the future he would be dismissed from the school. The captain had also cut him off from all holidays up to Christmas, and added that he must expect to take no part in Putnam Hall athletics. The latter was the hardest blow of all, for Ritter had hoped that Fall to make the football team.

"Now, what is he up to?" Pepper asked himself, and stuffing the napkin that held the cake and sandwich into his pocket, he moved forward on a run.

Reff Ritter had crossed the float and now he stood beside the sloop that was Jack's property. As Pepper came closer he saw that the bully held an ax in his hand, the handle shoved up the sleeve of his jacket.

"He is up to no good," thought Pepper. "I'll watch him and see what he does."

Pepper stepped out of sight behind the boathouse. Looking through a window and a door, he saw Ritter walk up and down the float. Evidently the bully wanted to make certain that he was not being observed. Then, with a swift move-

ment, he leaped aboard the sloop and crouched down out of sight.

"Guess it's time I got busy!" muttered Pepper to himself, and ran around the boathouse and out on the float. He was soon at the side of the *Alice*. He heard a blow sound out. Ritter was using the ax, apparently in an endeavor to chop a hole in the bottom of the sloop!

"Of all the mean things!" muttered Pepper to himself. "I'll soon stop that!" And he made a leap over the guard-rail of the craft. The ax was raised for another blow, but before it could be delivered, Pepper caught the bully by the shoulders and sent him sprawling on his back.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FOOTBALL ELEVEN

"Hi! let go of me!" spluttered Reff Ritter, as he found himself flat on his back, with the ax upraised in his two hands.

"Ritter, you leave this boat alone!" exclaimed Pepper.

"Humph! so it's you, Ditmore," muttered the bully, and now he turned over and arose.

"Going to chop the boat to pieces, I suppose," went on Pepper. "Well, not if I can prevent it."

"I'll chop you to pieces!" roared the bully, and swung the ax so suggestively that Pepper leaped back in alarm. "You've got no right to interfere with me!"

"This is Jack Ruddy's sloop; you have no right to touch her."

"Aw, you shut up."

"I'll not shut up, Reff Ritter. If you make another mark on this boat I'll have you locked up!"

"Humph! you think you've got the best of me,

don't you?" sneered the bully, but his manner showed that he was considerably disconcerted. He had imagined that all the cadets were at supper and that no one would see his foul actions.

"I want you to get off of this boat."

"Supposing I won't?"

"Then I'll call help, and advise Jack to have you arrested."

"Going to run the whole school, aren't you?"

"I am going to run this affair, Ritter. Now leave the boat."

"Oh, I'll leave," muttered the bully, and walking to the side, he sprang down to the float. Then he ran to the boathouse and placed the ax inside. "Don't you dare to mention this to anybody!" he shouted as he reappeared. "If you do, you'll get yourself in hot water. My word is as good as yours." And then he turned and ran towards the school building.

Pepper watched him out of sight.

"No use of reporting this to Captain Putnam," he reasoned. "Ritter would, of course, deny everything. Wonder if he did much damage?"

Pepper made an examination. Luckily the bully had not had time to get in his nefarious work to any extent, and the bottom of the sloop showed only two slight ax cuts, not deep enough to do harm.

"Caught him just in time," thought Pepper, and then he sat down on the stern seat and munched away at the sandwich and cake, washing the stuff down with a drink from the cooler in the boat-house.

By the time he had finished, the other cadets were coming from their supper, and soon he was joined by Jack, Dale and several others. In private, he told the young major of what had occurred.

"The rascal!" cried Jack. "If he hurts my boat he shall pay for it!"

"Captain Putnam must have given him a good dressing down to make him so ugly."

"Well, he deserved it."

"Say," put in Dale. "That was mean of old Crabtree to send you away from the table."

"Never mind, I'll pay him back," answered The Imp, grimly.

Several days passed and during that time Reff Ritter kept his distance. The bully was in a bitter mood, and even his cronies could get little out of him.

The reason for this was twofold. He was smarting over the treatment received at the hands of Jack and Captain Putnam and he was also disturbed because his father had written to him, stating he could allow him hardly any spending

money for the term. He had already borrowed a small amount from Paxton and he was wondering how he was going to pay it back. Added to this, he had gambled with some racetrack men during the summer, and one of those fellows now held his I O U for forty dollars.

"Dad has got to let me have money, that is all there is to it," he told himself. "If he won't, then I'll write to mother. She'll raise it for me somehow; she always does." Which shows how foolish an indulgent mother can sometimes be.

In the meantime, Andy had recovered from the accident and was now around as usual. Another hunt had been instituted for his belongings, but without success. A report came in that a strange man had been seen on the road just previous to the accident, and the cadets and Captain Putnam wondered if that individual had picked up Andy's things and made off with them.

"Maybe he was the fellow I saw," said Andy, and then he heaved a deep sigh, thinking he would never hear of his property again.

Jack and Pepper were glad to see Bert Field again, and also to see their old friend, Joseph Hogan. Emerald came back wearing a smile that was sunniness itself.

"Sure, an' it does me heart good to be here once more, so it does," he said, in his rich Irish brogue.

"I traveled all over the ould sod this summer, so I did. But Putnam Hall an' the States fer me every toime!"

"Is this your last term here, Emerald?" asked Dale.

"I think so—if I am lucky and get through. How about you?"

"I hope to graduate next June."

"And so do Jack and I," added Pepper. "But you can't always tell. I'll be sorry to leave Putnam Hall."

"That's so; such good times as we have had here," added Jack.

As soon as the cadets were settled down at the Hall, and the excitement over the runaway, the loss of Andy's things, and the fight between Jack and Ritter, was at an end, the talk of the boys turned to football and other Fall sports. As in the past, the cadets hoped to have a good eleven and win some substantial victories.

"Wonder if we'll be allowed to play Pornell," said Jack.

"I don't know," answered Dale. "I rather think the captain is sore over the reply he got from the head of that school, over the carryall affair, and maybe he won't let us play them." And in this Dale was correct. Pornell was cut out

that season, but it played Putnam Hall the year following.

Dale Blackmore was at the head of the football eleven, and, as before, he organized a fine team. Jack, Andy, Hogan, and Bart Conners were in their usual places.

"And I want you, too, Pepper," said Dale.

"Oh, I can go on the sub-bench," was the answer, for Pepper did not care very much for football. "Give Fred Century and Bert Field a chance."

"I know what Pepper wants," said Andy. "He wants us to play, while he sits in the grandstand, having a good time with the girls."

"Sure thing," answered The Imp, coolly. "Somebody has got to entertain 'em."

"They ought to be entertained by the game," came from Dale.

"Girls make me tired when they are at a football game," put in the cadet named Brown. "I took one once, and she said she knew all about football. After the game was half over she asked me how many runs and base hits had been made, and what they had done with the bats!"

Reff Ritter felt extra sore when the football eleven went out for practice. He wanted to play, but Captain Putnam would not allow it, and the bully went off by himself, up the lake-shore, where he sat down on a rock to smoke cigarettes and

brood over his troubles. While he sat there he took from his pocket a letter and read it over several times.

"Twenty dollars by Saturday! I don't see how I am going to raise it," he muttered to himself. "I guess I'll have to send mother a telegram for a remittance."

The first football game of the season was arranged to take place between Putnam Hall and an eleven from Cedarville called the Dauntless. The Dauntless players were made up of former college boys and some all-around athletes, and the cadets were told that they would have a stiff time of it trying to beat the aggregation. The game was to take place on the grounds at Cedarville. These were roped off and an admission fee was charged, the entire proceeds to go to a local Old Folks' Home.

"I've got news!" cried Pepper, a few days before the game was to come off. "Some of the Pornell students are coming to the game, and I understand they are going to try to make trouble for our team."

"Is it the Roy Bock crowd?" questioned Jack.

"Yes."

"Then it is up to you to keep an eye on them, Pepper. We can't do it while we are playing."

"I'll keep an eye on 'em, don't fear," was the answer.

The eleven practiced every afternoon, under the direction of Mr. Strong, who had once been a player on a college team. Josiah Crabtree took no interest in the sport, declaring it was a waste of valuable time.

"I've got a plan to outwit the Pornellites, if they try any funny work," said Pepper, the day before the game. And then he took about a dozen cadets aside and told them what his plan was. All agreed to help him, and did what he asked of them without delay.

The day for the game dawned clear and bright, and promptly on time the eleven started for Cedarville in the carryall, which had just come from the repair shop. Some of the cadets went on their bicycles, and Captain Putnam and some of the teachers drove over in carriages.

When the cadets arrived at the grounds they found quite a crowd assembled. Horns and banners were in evidence, and from a flagpole floated the Stars and Stripes. On one side was a grandstand and this was about three-quarters filled.

"I see some friends of mine," cried Pepper, and advanced to the stand.

He had caught sight of Laura Ford, and her sister, Flossie, two young ladies who lived on the

lake-shore at a place called Point View Lodge. In the past Pepper and his chums had done the Ford sisters several valuable services, for which Laura and Flossie were profoundly grateful.

"Oh, how do you do, Pepper?" called out Laura, on catching sight of him.

"Aren't you playing?" questioned Flossie.

"No, I'm merely an onlooker to-day," answered Pepper, and he raised his cap and shook hands. "How have you been since I saw you last?"

"Very well, thank you," answered Laura.

"We hope Putnam Hall will win," came from her sister.

"You can't hope it any more than I do," answered Pepper, and then he introduced several cadets to the young ladies, and all sat down to enjoy the game.

Pepper has his eyes open for the appearance of the students from Pornell. At first a few came in and took a stand in a corner, out of the way. They did not belong to the Bock crowd and seemed to be content to behave themselves.

"Maybe Roy Bock got cold feet and stayed away," said a cadet named Melmore.

"No, here he comes!" cried Bob Grenwood. "And Sedley and four others are with him."

Pepper looked in the direction pointed out and saw Roy Bock and his cronies approaching. All

had big tin horns and immense wooden rattles, and their pockets bulged with apples and peanuts.

"Whoop her up, Dauntless!" yelled Roy Bock, as soon as he reached the grandstand. "Whoop her up, and wipe up the ground with Putnam Hall!" And then he swung his big rattle, and his cronies did likewise. Then the Pornellites crowded into the grandstand and took seats near Pepper and his fellow cadets and the girls. They talked in loud voices and said a number of things that caused the faces of the girls to burn, and made the cadets thoroughly angry.

"They ought to be put off the stand!" cried Bob, indignantly.

"And they will be put off if they keep this up," answered Pepper. "They can cheer all they please for the Dauntless eleven, but they have got to act like gentlemen."

As soon as the two elevens appeared, the practice commenced, and then there was a toss-up for goals, which Dauntless won. They took the south goal and Putnam Hall took the ball. Then came the kick-off, and the game was on.

CHAPTER IX

THE FOOTBALL GAME

At first the playing was rather tame, but inside of a few minutes both elevens warmed up, and from that moment the work became fast and furious.

The Dauntless team had the advantage of weight, but the eleven had not played together as much as had the majority of the Putnam Hall cadets, consequently some of their combination efforts were decidedly ragged. One move resulted in a bad fumble on the part of the left end. The ball was captured by Jack, and he carried it forward fifteen yards before downed.

"Oh, my, isn't it rough!" screamed Laura Ford, as the young major hit the grass with great force, two of the Dauntless men being on top of him.

"Oh, that's all in the game," was Pepper's comment. "But I shouldn't want to see anybody get his ribs stove in," he added.

Putnam Hall got the pigskin to within ten

yards of the Dauntless goal line, and then came an unexpected turn of affairs. The leather was lost by the Putnam Hall center, and carried around the right end and up the field for thirty yards.

"Hurrah! that's the way to do it, Dauntless!"

"Keep it up!"

"Dauntless to the front!" yelled Roy Bock. "Everybody in the game!" and then, in the midst of the excitement, he drew back with a soft apple in his hand and threw the half-decayed fruit at Jack. It just grazed the young major's shoulder.

Pepper was on the watch, for he had expected just such a dirty trick. He leaped up, and reaching over, caught the Pornell student by the ear.

"Ouch!" yelled Bock. "Let go!"

"You get out of the grandstand!" cried Pepper. "If you don't I'll get a crowd to mob you."

"See here, Ditmore——"

"Don't talk—get!" interrupted Pepper.

"Let Roy alone!" sang out Bat Sedley. "If you don't, I'll crack you one!"

"Hello, you rascals!" came unexpectedly from nearby, and a farmer named Baker showed himself. "You here? Jest wait till I git my paws on you!" And he started in the direction of Roy Bock, Bat Sedley and two of their cronies.

"Great Scott! It's that farmer!" ejaculated Roy Bock, and he started to scramble out of the

grandstand in a hurry, and after him went the others.

But they were not quite quick enough for Darius Baker, and at the foot of the stand the farmer caught Bock in one hand and Bat Sedley in the other. Then he swung the two together until their heads cracked.

"Will steal my apples and pears?" he shrilled. "Will talk sassy to my darter, eh? I'll teach you!" And then, letting go suddenly, he cuffed Roy Bock on the ear and thumped Bat Sedley in the jaw so hard that that student howled outright.

"Let up!"

"Please don't hit me again!"

"It was all a mistake!"

"No mistake!" bawled Darius Baker. "Git out o' here before I call the constable an' have ye locked up!" And then Roy Bock and his cronies lost no time in hurrying away, without so much as looking behind them.

"Guess you know 'em?" remarked Pepper, when the farmer came back into the stand and resumed his seat.

"Guess I do!" was the snorted-out reply. "They came around to my place yesterday, and stole my apples and pears, and talked sassy to my darter an' the hired man. I saw 'em, but they ran away before I could git my hands on 'em. I vowed

I take 'em down a peg when I met 'em, an' I guess I done it," added the old farmer, with evident satisfaction.

"You did, Mr. Baker," answered Pepper. "And you've done us a service in the bargain."

"How's thet?"

"Those fellows came here to make trouble for our eleven, the Putnam Hall team."

"That so? Well, then, I'm mighty glad I cleared 'em out. I like to see a game now an' then, but I want it clean—no rowdy work."

There was no time to say more, for everybody was interested in the game. The Dauntless eleven had worked the pigskin up to within a few yards of the Putnam Hall goal line, and now over it came.

"A touchdown for Dauntless!"

"Great work! Now make it a goal!"

The ball was brought out, and the Dauntless quarterback kicked a beautiful goal, amid a great cheering and tooting of horns.

"Eight minutes more to play," said Dale. "Boys, let us tie the score if nothing else."

Again the battle was on, and now Dale made a beautiful run, being aided by some fine interference by Jack and Andy. Then Hogan got the pigskin and worked it up to within five yards of the Dauntless goal line—and then the whistle

blew and the first half of the great game had to come to a close.

The Putnam Hall eleven were a sober lot when they filed into their dressing-room to be rubbed down and to talk it over.

"Well, they've only got a touchdown and goal to their credit," said Jack, cheerfully. "That's not such a terrible lead to overcome."

"We must have more snap and ginger!" cried Dale. "Now, I want everybody on the job from the word go."

"Try that left-end play," suggested George Strong. "It may surprise them—and, anyway, it can do no harm."

The play he mentioned was something of a trick they had been practicing for a week. It was rather intricate, but Dale promised to take his advice and use it at the first opportunity.

The Dauntless eleven scented a victory, and went into the second half of the game with renewed vigor. But Putnam Hall stood up manfully, and Andy got the pigskin in a manner that elicited much applause. He carried it down the gridiron for eight yards and passed it over to Jack. Then, on the next down, Dale signaled for the trick play. Across the field came the ball and then back to center. Here a quick turn was made that bewildered the Dauntless eleven. On came the

pigskin, and almost before anybody knew it, Jack kicked a goal from the field.

"Hurrah! a field goal for Putnam Hall!"

"Talk about clever work, wasn't that great?"

"It sure was!"

"Never mind," came from a Dauntless supporter. "That doesn't count as much as the goal from a touchdown."

"Well, it's blood for Putnam Hall, anyway."

Again the leather went into play, and once more each eleven did its level best to force the pigskin over the opponents' line. The Dauntless aggregation were now wary of more tricks, and they tried a trick of their own, massing at the left and then running the ball up center. But this did not work. The ball was lost to Andy, who passed it over to Dale.

"Go it, Blackmore!" was the cry.

"Down him, Cressy!"

On and on sped Dale with the rival left end at his heels. Hogan and Jack were pounding on behind, and they stopped Cressy from blocking the Putnam Hall captain. Over the line came Dale, to drop flat an instant later, out of breath.

"Hurrah! a touchdown for Putnam Hall."

"Now for a goal!"

The wind was blowing strongly, yet Andy

measured the distance well and kicked the goal, amid a cheering that could be heard half a mile.

"Oh, wasn't that grand!" murmured Flossie Ford.

"Perfectly lovely!" added Laura.

"It's what we wanted," answered Pepper. "Keep it up!" he yelled, and blew his horn with all his might.

With nine minutes more to play, both elevens went at the game with great vigor. The Dauntless team wanted at least to make a field goal—to tie the score. But Putnam Hall held them back, and two minutes before the whistle blew made another touchdown and kicked the goal. When the game was ended the pigskin was on the Dauntless forty-five-yard line.

Putnam Hall had won!

What a cheering followed, and what a tooting of horns and sounding of rattles! The cadets cheered for their opponents and were cheered in return, and then all filed off the field.

"A dandy game!" cried Pepper to his chums. "Simply great!" And he fairly hugged Jack and Andy.

"A splendid game," was Mr. Strong's comment.

"I am proud of our cadets," added Captain Putnam.

"They are an honor to the school, sir."

"Yes, Mr. Strong, they are."

Some of the boys remained in Cedarville for the rest of the afternoon. As soon as Jack and Andy had put aside their football outfits, they joined Pepper and the Ford girls, and all went to meet Mr. Rossmore Ford, who had just arrived in his carriage.

"I am sorry I missed the game," said the rich gentleman. "It must have been fine."

"Oh, papa, it was lovely!" cried Laura.

"I was so pleased to see Putnam Hall win!" added Flossie.

"Were you?" said Mr. Ford, and laughed good-naturedly. "Now, I imagined you came to encourage the Dauntless boys."

"Papa, you know better!" cried both girls.

"How would you young gentlemen like to drive home with us and dine at the Lodge?" asked the gentleman.

"Oh, yes, come!" cried Flossie.

"Do!" urged Laura.

"Well, I don't know," answered Jack, slowly. "The eleven is going to celebrate to-night, and they want us. Otherwise, I'd like it very much."

"Then come some other time," answered Rossmore Ford.

"Thank you, we will," answered Andy; and

after a few words more the Fords drove off and the cadets walked away to join their fellows.

It was a jolly crowd that returned to Putnam Hall late that afternoon, and Captain Putnam was willing that they should have all the sport the rules of the institution permitted.

"Bonfires to-night!" cried Andy.

"Biggest ever!" returned Pepper. "I've got a surprise."

"What is it, Pep?" asked several in a chorus.

"If I tell you, will you keep it to yourselves?"

"Sure!" was the ready answer.

"Well, you saw those tar-roofers at work on the new top of the dock at Cedarville?"

"Yes."

"I bought three empty tar-barrels from the foreman. He is going to leave them in the woods yonder for me at seven o'clock. They'll make the finest bonfires you ever saw."

"That's the cheese!" cried Dale, slangily. "Do you know what we can do? Place one barrel on top of another and touch them off. They'll make the greatest blaze you ever heard of."

"But mum's the word until the right time comes," warned Pepper. And then the crowd dispersed for the evening drill.

Two boys had been listening to the talk from

behind a nearby clump of bushes. They were Reff Ritter and Gus Coulter.

Neither of the cronies had gone to the football game, having preferred to walk to a cabin in the woods, where they could smoke and play cards. The victory of Jack and his friends had put them in a particularly bad humor.

"I suppose they expect a great celebration with those tar-barrels," muttered Coulter. "Say, I tell you what let's do!" he cried. "Let us sneak to the woods before they arrive and roll the barrels down to the lake!"

"I'll do it," answered Reff Ritter. "Anything to put a damper on that celebration."

"Well, water will dampen the tar-barrels," added Coulter, grimly.

CHAPTER X

PUTTING OUT A LIVELY BLAZE

Pepper was so full of high spirits that at the supper table he could not resist the temptation to play a joke. He saw Joe Nelson using his handkerchief and, on the sly, took up the pepper-shaker and dosed the cloth liberally with pepper.

Poor Joe caught the full benefit of the pepper, and in the midst of the meal commenced to sneeze loudly.

"Why, Nelson, what is the matter?" asked Mr. Strong, who was at the table that evening.

"I don't—ker-choo!—know!" stammered Joe. "I believe—ker-choo! ker-choo!"

"Exactly," whispered Pepper. "Very simple explanation, very."

"I—ker-choo!—I guess I had better—ker-choo!" went on Joe.

"He's 'ker-chooing' all he needs to," was Jack's comment, and this caused a general titter.

"I guess I'll ask to—ker-choo!—to be excused—

ker-choo!" went on Joe, and jumping up he left the table and the room. He ran out on the campus and there sneezed himself free of the pepper, much to his relief.

Joe was about to return to the mess-hall when he chanced to see two figures sneaking along in the semi-darkness, in the direction of the woods. He was just able to make out that the pair were Reff Ritter and Gus Coulter when they disappeared behind the trees.

"Now, what are those fellows up to?" mused Joe, as he walked slowly to the mess-hall. "No good, I'll venture."

He sat down and commenced to eat. Then, of a sudden, he uttered an exclamation.

"I've got it! That's it!"

"What is it, Nelson?" asked George Strong.

"Oh—er—nothing," stammered the cadet. But when the teacher was not looking, he leaned over towards Jack.

"What is it, Joe?" whispered the young major.

"Tell Pepper I just saw Ritter and Coulter sneaking into the woods."

"You did!" Jack closed one eye. "And you think——"

"They may have learned about the barrels."

"If that is so, we'll have to watch 'em," mur-

mured Jack, and immediately passed word to Pepper, Dale and Andy.

The cadets could scarcely wait to finish their meal, and cut themselves short on cake and pears. Pepper was the first out, but he was quickly followed by Andy and Jack.

"Let us try to surprise them—if they are after the barrels," said The Imp.

"Maybe they'll set fire to 'em before we get there," suggested the acrobatic youth.

"If they do that, I'll make 'em pay for the barrels," cried Pepper. "I am not going to put up three dollars for another fellow's fun."

"Did you pay the roofer that much for the barrels?"

"Yes."

The three boys hurried across the campus and dove into the woods beyond. Then Pepper put up his hand for silence.

"Let us surprise 'em if we can," he whispered.

"That's the talk," answered the young major.

It did not take the three long to reach the vicinity where the tar-barrels had been left. As they approached they saw a light flare up.

"They are setting 'em on fire!" cried Andy.

"Stop, Ritter! Stop, Coulter!" yelled Pepper. "Don't you light those barrels!"

"Ha! ha!" came from the bully of the Hall.

"What's an old tar-barrel, anyway? Guess we can fire them if we want to!"

"Those are my barrels," answered Pepper.

He rushed forward, followed by Jack and Andy. But they were too late, for on the instant a big flame shot up and all three of the tar-barrels, standing in a close triangle, and filled with dried leaves, commenced to burn furiously. As the flames shot up among the trees, Ritter and Coulter backed away.

"Good-by to those barrels!" came sorrowfully from Andy. "We'll not be able to use them for the celebration to-night."

"I'll fix you for this, Ritter; and you, too, Coulter!" called out Pepper, bitterly. "Oh, what luck!" he groaned, as he saw the flames from the tar-barrels climb higher and higher. "What a grand bonfire they would have made on the lake-front!"

"Boys, this fire is dangerous!" ejaculated Jack.

"What do you mean?" came from the others.

"It is going to set fire to the woods! See, the dried leaves are catching already! If it reaches yonder cedars there will be a terrible conflagration here!"

"Phew! that's true!" came from Pepper. His merry face grew sober for the moment. "What shall we do?"

"We are not responsible," said Andy. "It is Ritter and Coulter's fault."

"But we don't want these grand woods to burn down," went on the young major. "Besides, the wind is rising and it is blowing towards the gym and the stables! The burning embers might set fire to those buildings!"

"Come on and put the blaze out!" said Andy.

"How are you going to do it? We haven't any water—and water isn't of much account against tar, anyway. Gracious, see those flames shoot up!" Jack added, as a column of fire shot skyward.

"One of the trees is catching already!" gasped Pepper. "We had better sound an alarm!"

"Andy, go back to the school and tell the others, teachers and all," ordered the young major. "Captain Putnam will know what to do. Pepper, you and I had better try to throw dirt and stones on the barrels. That will keep down the flames a little."

The acrobatic youth set off on a sprint in the direction of Putnam Hall. While he was gone the others did their best to subdue the rapidly-increasing conflagration. It was hot work, and soon the perspiration was pouring down their faces.

"It's no use!" panted Pepper, when the wind sent a sudden eddy of black smoke in his face.

"It would take a regular fire department to put out that blaze!"

"Maybe Captain Putnam will send out the bucket brigade," answered his chum.

The wind was steadily increasing, and as it whirled around it sent the sparks flying in all directions. Jack had one ember settle on his hand and Pepper was burnt on the ear. They got a good deal of smoke in their eyes and soon commenced to cough. But they kept on throwing all the loose dirt and stones possible on the fire.

"I wish the barrels didn't have quite so much tar on 'em," panted Pepper. "It's a wonder the roofer left so much inside."

"He wanted to give you the worth of your money," answered the young major, grimly.

After what seemed a long time a shout was heard, and then Andy burst into view.

"The bucket brigade is coming with pails of water," he said. "And some other cadets are to get rakes and wet swabs and shovels."

"They can't come any too quick!" answered Pepper. "See, two of the trees are burning already."

"Yes, and two others are catching!" announced Jack. Then an extra puff of wind sent all of the cadets from the vicinity of the blazing barrels.

"I suppose Ritter and Coulter didn't dream of

SOME CADETS CAME INTO VIEW, EACH CARRYING A BUCKET OF WATER.

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such a fire when they started it," was Andy's comment.

"Just the same, they are responsible," answered Jack, gravely.

A yell came from afar, and soon some cadets ran into view, each carrying a bucket of water. Leading them was George Strong, who had a long-handled rake and a shovel.

"Boys! boys!" didn't you know better than to light a fire here!" cried the teacher.

"We didn't do it," answered Jack.

The water was thrown on the blazing barrels, and then the teacher tried to knock them flat with his rake. But that caused a heavy shower of sparks to ascend, setting fire to some nearby bushes.

"It will be better to use the shovel," said Jack. "Dirt will put out such a fire quicker than anything."

"I believe you, Major Ruddy," answered Mr. Strong, and then he sent some cadets back for more shovels and a few pickaxes, with which to loosen up the dirt.

Soon many more cadets arrived, and with them Captain Putnam. Among the number were Coulter and Ritter, and the pair looked much dismayed.

"Say, I didn't think the fire would spread to the woods," whispered Gus Coulter.

"Hush!" warned his crony. "Don't you admit that we did it. If it comes to the worst, say it was an accident, that we were trying to light a torch, to sneak the barrels away, when they took fire."

"All right."

More water was thrown on the barrels, and then a small army of cadets commenced to dig up dirt and stones, with which to cover the burning objects. This worked very well on the barrels. But to reach the trees was different. One thick cedar was blazing away like a torch—the flames far above their heads.

"Let us cut that tree down," ordered Captain Putnam.

Two axes had been brought along, and Dale used one while Peleg Snuggers wielded the other. Soon the cedar commenced to totter.

"Look out!" cried Captain Putnam, and then crash! the tree came down, directly on top of the tar-barrels. Up went a thick cloud of smoke and sparks. But the cadets were ready with dirt and stones, and the danger of a new blaze was quickly averted.

While the tree was being cut down, the cadets and teachers had been busy with pickaxes and shovels, and also with their rakes and wet swabs, and had put out much of the fire elsewhere. One more tree had to be leveled, and this work was

done by Joe and Bart. Then, after five minutes more of hard work, the last of the fire was extinguished, and the crowd in the woods was left in darkness.

"Hello, it's dark enough now," cried Pepper. "We'll need a lantern to get out with."

"Here's a torch," answered one cadet, and took up a cedar bough, and commenced to wave it into a flame.

"No more of that, Bates!" cried Captain Putnam. "We have had enough of fire. We'll go back in the dark. Snuggers, you stay here and see to it that the fire doesn't break out again."

"Yes, sir," answered the general utility man.

"Here is a pistol. If it does break out, fire two shots for an alarm."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll send Alexander Pop here with more water and with some lunch, for you'll have to stay all night," went on the owner of the school. Alexander Pop was a colored man who had come to the school to wait on the table.

"Yes, sir," answered Snuggers. He did not much relish remaining in the woods all night, but he felt that he had to obey orders.

One by one the cadets and the teachers returned to Putnam Hall. The conflagration in the woods

had rather broken up the anticipated celebration in honor of the football victory.

"Now, I want to know who placed those tar-barrels in the woods," said Captain Putnam, when he had assembled the cadets in the school building.

"It was Jerry Cole, the roofer from Cedarville," answered John Fenwick, a small youth usually called Mumps. He was known as a toady and a sneak, and was very chummy with Dan Baxter.

"How do you know, Fenwick?"

"I saw him with the barrels on his wagon."

"Why should he put the barrels there?"

"I will tell you," answered Pepper, stepping forward. "I bought them to celebrate with to-night. I thought they'd make a dandy bonfire."

"Indeed! Then you set them ablaze, Ditmore?"

"No, sir. My idea was to roll them to the lake-shore and pile them one on top of the other."

"Then who did set them on fire in the woods?"

For the moment nobody spoke, but Pepper, Jack and Andy, as well as Joe, looked at Reff Ritter and Gus Coulter.

"I want an answer!" cried Captain Putnam, sternly. "Who started that fire?"

He looked around from one cadet to another. But nobody spoke.

CHAPTER XI

A MYSTERIOUS HAPPENING

It was a rule of honor among the cadets of Putnam Hall that no student should tell on another. To do that would have been to put one's self down as a sneak, and none of our friends wanted such a reputation.

"I ask again, who started that fire?" went on Captain Putnam, with increased sternness.

"I rather think I know the guilty parties," said George Strong, who had walked away on an errand and had just returned. "Ritter and Coulter, what have you to say?"

The two culprits started, and Coulter turned pale.

"Why, I—er——" stammered Gus. "I—that is——" He did not know how to proceed. He did not dare deny his guilt, not knowing but what the assistant teacher might have seen him and his crony light the tar-barrels.

"Well, if you—er—want to know the truth,

Captain Putnam, we—er—started the fire," stammered Reff Ritter. "But it was an accident."

"An accident?"

"Yes, sir. We were—er—going to roll the barrels down to the lake—going to hide 'em so that Ditmore and his friends couldn't find 'em, you know. Well, we didn't want to get the tar on our hands, so we—er—started a little fire to see by—it was dark under the trees. All of a sudden the barrels blazed up. We—er—didn't expect such a big blaze."

"That's it," cried Coulter, eagerly. "We just made the fire at first to see by."

"Then you didn't really want to fire the barrels under the trees?"

"No, sir," came from both of the guilty ones.

"It was a rash thing to do, to start such a blaze. In this wind you might have burnt down the whole woods and endangered the school buildings."

"I don't believe Ritter and Coulter," whispered Andy to Pepper.

"Neither do I," was the reply.

"Ditmore, you said the barrels belonged to you?" went on the owner of the school.

"Yes, sir. I bought them from the tar-roofer in Cedarville and he delivered them. We were going to have a great bonfire—and we did!" And The

Imp said this so dryly that even Captain Putnam had to smile.

"Well, I presume I shall have to drop the matter," said the captain, after a few more questions. "But let me warn you all about fires in those woods in the future. If a fire gained headway here we might burn everything down to the ground."

So, from an official standpoint, the matter was dropped. Ritter beckoned to Coulter, and they hurried away, followed by Nick Paxton and one or two others.

"Well, that ends the tar-barrel celebration," said Pepper, rather mournfully. "I really ought to make Ritter and Coulter pay for the barrels."

"You won't get any money out of Ritter," remarked Bart Conners.

"How do you know, Bart?"

"Because he hasn't any. He asked for credit at the store yesterday—to buy some cigarettes—and the shopkeeper refused, saying Ritter owed him eighty cents already."

"Humph!" mused Pepper, and said no more.

"Come on—forget it!" cried Jack. "We'll celebrate anyway."

"We've got other barrels," came from Dale.

The cadets rushed out and to the lake-shore, and soon several bonfires were blazing merrily. Around

these the students congregated, and sang songs and "cut up" generally. Dale had to make a speech, and the boys caught him up on their shoulders and carried him around the campus.

"Isn't it grand!" murmured Bert Field. "I am mighty glad I came to Putnam Hall."

"So am I," answered Fred Century. "It's much different from what it was at Pornell Academy."

"It was a great victory, Fred, wasn't it?"

"It certainly was, Bert. I am only sorry for one thing."

"What is that?"

"That it wasn't Pornell we beat instead of that other club."

"Oh, well, we'll get a chance at Pornell some day," answered Bert Field.

The celebration along the lake-shore lasted until half-past eleven. Then the bell was rung, and laughing and singing, the cadets trooped off to their various dormitories.

"All quiet by midnight!" came the order.

"Fifteen minutes yet," cried Andy, consulting his watch. "Whoop-la! Here goes!" And in the joyousness of high spirits he turned a handspring over one of the beds. Then he turned another spring over a table and stood on his head on one of the chairs.

"Hurrah for Snow's Imperial Consolidated

Circus!" cried Pepper. "The one and only aggregation of stupendous wonders on the face of the globe! The marvelous twisting and death-defying acrobat! Walk up and see the blood-curdling exhibition! It will cost you but the small sum of a dime, ten cents; children double price, and no grandfathers unaccompanied by their parents admitted. Line will form on the left and everybody will please have his cash ready. Transfers not accepted on this line."

"Good for Pepper!" came from Jack. "When he fails as a student he can turn dime-museum shouter."

"On the right you will see our most mysterious wonder, Major Jacobus Ruddonowsky, the royal Russian sword swallower," went on The Imp, pointing to his chum. "He swallows two swords for breakfast, three for lunch and six to eight for dinner, with daggers for dessert. He is wonderfully strong, and can carry on his arms an amount of gold lace that would break a camel's back. As soon as the tent is full he will sing for you that famous ditty, entitled, "How I Love to Line You Up When I'm Major of the Gang."

"Wow! that is where you caught it, Jack!" cried Dale, with a grin.

"And here we have a third wonder," went on Pepper, pointing to the football captain. "Com-

modore Daleo, the leather-ball juggler. The most renowned juggler of the spheroid in the world! You think it is here, but it is not, for lo! he has juggled it over the line and kicked it as high as an airship. He will show you——"

"Silence in here!" came a voice from the doorway, and Josiah Crabtree appeared. "I will have silence!"

"Oh, dear!" murmured Pepper. "Anybody got any silence to spare? Mr. Crabtree wants some."

"You must all be in bed by midnight, and the light must be out," went on the teacher. "This unseemly revel must cease!" And then he walked on, to stop the noise coming from the other dormitories.

"Say, Pepper, how do you like that?" murmured Fred.

"I knew there would be frost," sighed The Imp. "Every time old Crabtree appears we get a cold wave."

"Be thankful he didn't mark you down for extra lessons," said Andy.

"If he did that I'd rebel," returned Pepper.

After that the talk was carried on in whispers, and each cadet lost no time in disrobing. A few minutes after midnight all were in bed, and one after another lost himself in the land of dreams.

The day had been a particularly strenuous one

for Jack, and the young major slept soundly until the rising-bell rang loudly. Then he rubbed his eyes sleepily and stretched himself.

"Wish I didn't have to get up just yet," he murmured. "I could sleep another hour without half trying."

"Same here," responded Pepper.

"I never feel awake until after I've had a wash," came from Andy, who had just leaped up.

Soon all of the cadets in the dormitory were dressing, and one by one they washed up and went below. Andy and Jack were the last to leave.

"What's the matter?" asked the acrobatic youth, as he saw the young major searching around for something.

"I'm looking for my watch and chain, Andy."

"Where did you put it?"

"Where I always do—on the stand at the head of my bed."

"Maybe it fell on the floor."

"If it did, it isn't there now." Jack got down on his knees to look around, and then turned over the bedclothes and some other things.

"Maybe Pepper played a joke on you, Jack."

"That may be so. I'll go down and ask him about it."

The young major looked through his clothing and all over the dormitory, and then hurried below.

As it was Sunday morning, there was no drill, and the cadets were gathering in the mess-hall for breakfast.

"Pepper, did you see my watch?" asked Jack, coming up to his chum.

"Your watch? No," was the ready reply.

"You didn't?" cried the young major, and now he was more concerned than ever.

"Saw it last night, when you put it on the stand as usual."

"You didn't hide it? Come, now, tell the truth."

"Honor bright; the last I saw of it was when you placed it on the stand when you went to bed."

"It's gone; and the chain with it."

"You don't mean it, Jack!" Did you look all around?"

"Everywhere."

"Did you ask the other fellows about it?"

"No; but I will, right away."

The young major walked to one roommate after another and asked about his watch and chain. All denied knowing anything about the timepiece. Several had seen him place the watch on the stand at the head of the bed, but that was all.

"Well, it's a mystery what has become of it, that's sure," was Jack's comment. "It certainly couldn't walk off by itself."

"Well, a good watch knows how to run," re-

marked Pepper, dryly, for he couldn't help having his joke. "But, seriously, Jack, do you think somebody stole the watch and chain?"

"I don't know what to think."

"I don't imagine anybody in our dormitory would do such a thing."

"Neither do I. But the watch and chain are gone. The question is, Where?"

"Hadn't you better report the matter to Captain Putnam?"

"I will, after I have taken another look around," answered the young major, and left the mess-room just as the bell rang for breakfast.

"Why did Major Ruddy leave?" asked Josiah Crabtree, harshly, as he saw that the young officer was missing.

"He had something of importance to attend to," answered Pepper.

"Humph! It is his duty to be at the table on time, if he wants his breakfast," muttered the dictatorial teacher.

Jack did not come back for the best part of half an hour. By that time the breakfast was nearly over.

"Major Ruddy, what does this mean?" demanded Josiah Crabtree.

"A matter of importance, Mr. Crabtree," answered the young officer.

"I cannot permit cadets to come in late to breakfast."

"This couldn't be helped, sir. I will explain to you and to Captain Putnam directly after I have finished."

"Very well. If it is of real importance I will let it pass. But otherwise I shall mark you for being tardy," returned Josiah Crabtree, harshly.

Jack merely bowed and then he sat down and ate his breakfast. While he was doing so, Pepper leaned over to him.

"Find the watch?" he whispered.

"No—not the least trace of it," answered Jack.

The young major did not feel much like eating. The watch was a gold one and the chain was also of gold, and both were valuable. They had been a birthday gift from his parents.

"Say, Jack, this is as bad as my loss," came from Andy, in a low tone. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. I want to talk the matter over with Captain Putnam first," answered the young officer.

CHAPTER XII

AN INVITATION ACCEPTED

Captain Putnam looked very grave when Jack reported the loss of the gold watch and chain.

"You are certain you left them on the stand when you went to sleep?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir. Pepper Ditmore saw me put them there, and Dale Blackmore saw it, too."

"And you have looked everywhere for them?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will go up and look around with you."

"All right, sir. But it will do no good," answered the young major.

"You say that all your roommates deny taking the watch and chain."

"Yes, sir. They say they didn't see the watch at all after we went to bed."

"Major Ruddy, do you suspect anybody of this crime?" demanded the owner of the school, looking Jack full in the face.

"No, sir," was the prompt answer. "It's a

complete mystery to me. All I know about it is, that I left the watch and chain on the stand at the head of my bed when I went to sleep and this morning they were gone."

"Did any of the other cadets enter your dormitory during the night?"

"Not that I know of."

"They may have been skylarking and may have carried the watch and chain off by—accident, let us say," finished the captain, significantly.

"If anybody came in, nobody who sleeps in our room seems to be aware of it."

Captain Putnam and Jack passed up to the dormitory, followed by Josiah Crabtree. They were soon joined by Pepper and the other occupants of the apartment. Another search was made, but the gold watch and chain were not found, nor were any clues concerning the timepiece unearthed.

"What were the watch and chain worth?" asked Fred.

"I don't know; maybe fifty or sixty dollars," answered Jack.

"Then if they were stolen the thief made quite a haul."

"Do you think they were stolen, Century?" demanded the owner of the school.

"Doesn't it look like it, sir?"

"But if they were stolen, who is guilty?" asked Josiah Crabtree, glaring around from one cadet to another.

For the moment nobody spoke.

"I don't suspect any of my roommates," said Jack, quickly. "I think it was done by some outsider."

"Some other cadet?" asked Crabtree.

"Possibly; or else by some of the help."

"Gracious, Ruddy, I—er—I hope you don't suspect me!" stammered the teacher.

"No, sir; I meant some of the servants."

"Ah, I see!" Josiah Crabtree looked relieved. "You may be right. Perhaps some of the new colored help took the watch," he went on, to Captain Putnam.

"I will start an investigation," returned the owner of the school.

Captain Putnam was as good as his word, and over an hour was spent in questioning the help, and the other cadets, but without results. The investigation was continued Monday morning. But not the first trace of the missing watch and chain was discovered anywhere.

"It assuredly is a mystery," said Captain Putnam at last. "What do you make of it, Mr. Strong?" he asked of his second assistant.

"It is a very unfortunate occurrence," answered

George Strong. "If there is a thief in Putnam Hall we ought to locate him. As long as he remains undetected none of us will be safe."

"How are you going to catch him?"

"I don't know. We might try to trace up the watch and chain through the authorities."

"I hate to let the authorities know anything has been stolen in the school. It gives us a bad name in public." The two men were alone, so they could speak freely.

"It will give the school a worse name if we don't get the watch and chain back. I am afraid Major Ruddy can hold you for the worth of them."

"He can, and I expect to pay for them if we don't get them back. I will think it over, and perhaps I'll report the loss."

Later on, the authorities were notified that a watch and chain were missing. No details were given, but the police were asked to look out for the watch and chain in pawnbroking establishments and elsewhere.

"I shall also offer a reward," said the owner of the school, and the next day a bulletin was posted, offering a reward of ten dollars for information leading to the recovery of the timepiece and conviction of the thief.

"It's tough to go without your watch, Jack," said Pepper.

"Captain Putnam is going to loan me one for the present," was the young major's reply. "It's only a silver affair, but he says it keeps good time, and that's the main thing."

A day or two after the reward was offered, Jack, Pepper and Andy received an invitation to take dinner at Point View Lodge with the Fords and spend the evening there. The weather was now growing colder and the Fords expected before long to close up their summer home and move to the city for the winter.

"Say, this is all to the merry!" cried Pepper, as he read the invitation. "Of course we'll go."

"If Captain Putnam will let us," added Andy, anxiously.

"I think he will," returned Jack. "He is so cut up over this watch affair I think he will do almost anything for me."

The three went to the captain and showed the invitation, and were told that they could go to Point View Lodge, but that they must be back at Putnam Hall by ten o'clock.

"It's lucky we can go in our uniforms," said Pepper. "Otherwise I suppose we'd have to go in full dress, eh?"

"Sure thing."

"How are we going to get to the Lodge? We can't walk."

"Might hire a carriage for once."

"Too slow. The Lodge is so far off. We could make better time on our bicycles."

"But if it rains—or snows?"

"Then we'll have to take a carriage."

The three cadets watched the weather anxiously. It remained clear and cool up to the afternoon of the day they were going and then grew cloudy.

"Looks like rain or snow to me," announced Jack.

"Oh, don't croak!" cried Andy. "It's a bit cloudy, but that's all. I guess it will hold off until morning."

"Got your bicycle ready for the trip, Andy?" questioned Pepper.

"Sure, I oiled up this morning. How about you?"

"Ready since yesterday, and Jack's wheel is ready, too," was the answer. "Oh, say, don't you anticipate a dandy time at Point View Lodge?"

"Yes, indeed! The Ford girls are just all right."

"Best ever!" chimed in Jack.

"Don't forget to fill your lamps!" cried Andy, as he turned away.

"Mine is full," answered Jack.

"I'll see to mine," came from Pepper. "Glad you mentioned it. It will be quite dark on the

road to-night, and I don't want to run in a hole and take a header."

"None of us want to do that. We'd look fine going into the Lodge with our faces and hands all dirt and our uniforms torn."

The cadets hurried away in various directions. They had been talking in the gymnasium, near one of the dressing-rooms, and they did not know that anybody else was near. But Mumps, the sneak, had overheard every word. As soon as they had gone, the younger cadet hurried off toward the boathouse. Here he found half a dozen students assembled, including Ritter and Coulter.

"Say, do you fellows know that Ruddy, Ditmore and Snow are going out to-night?" he said. He always loved to tell the news, and thought himself quite important in so doing.

"Where to?" asked one of the cadets.

"To Point View Lodge—the place where the Ford family live. They've got an invitation to dinner."

"Lucky dogs!" came from another cadet. As he spoke he looked at Reff Ritter, but that individual merely scowled, and took surreptitious whiffs at a cigarette he was smoking.

"How are they going to Point View?" asked another who was present.

"Going on their bicycles," answered Mumps. "It's quite a ride, isn't it?"

"Oh, not for them. They can make it in half an hour if they try. But they'll find it pretty dark to-night, I'm thinking," added the cadet, with a glance out of the boathouse window at the leaden sky.

The talk continued and Ritter listened closely to every word. Then he arose and motioned to Coulter, and the two walked outside.

"Did you hear what Mumps said?" he asked of his crony.

"About those chaps going to the Fords' home?"

"Yes."

"What of it?"

"I was thinking we might spoil their fun."

"And get caught, as we did with the tar-barrels," grumbled Gus Coulter.

"We'll take good care that nobody sees us this time."

"What are you thinking of doing?" asked Coulter, curiously.

"Come with me and I'll tell you," answered Reff Ritter, and took his crony by the arm. Slowly they walked across the campus, and as they did so Ritter unfolded a plot that had just then come into his head.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, after he had finished.

"Very good; if it will work, and we are not caught."

"We'll not get caught if you'll do as I say. Listen, Gus, all you need to do is to stand on guard, to give me warning if anybody comes. I'll do the rest."

"When do you want to get to work?"

Reff Ritter looked around anxiously. It was cold on the campus and growing darker rapidly. Only a few cadets were in sight.

"Come on now," he answered. "We'll see if the coast is clear."

They walked to the end of the gymnasium building, where, in a long room, the bicycles of the students were kept. It was pitch dark inside and not a soul was in sight.

"Now, you remain outside," said Ritter. "If you see anybody coming begin to whistle 'Yankee Doodle,' as loud as you can. Don't wait for me, for I'll go out the back way."

"All right. But let me know when you are through," answered Coulter, somewhat nervously.

"Sure."

Coulter took his stand outside of the building and peered forth eagerly in the darkness. Only three cadets were in view and they presently

entered the school building. Then ten minutes went by—a long wait for the youth who was aiding Ritter in his plot. Then Reff came quickly from the gymnasium.

"Anybody around?" he asked hurriedly.

"No."

"Good enough."

"Have you finished, Reff?"

"Yes."

"Did you get at all three of the wheels?"

"I sure did. Say, they will have their own troubles, see if they don't!" chuckled the bully. "But come on before anybody sees us," he added, and stalked away in the darkness, with his crony beside him.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WORK OF THE ENEMY

It was not until a few minutes after five o'clock that Jack, Andy and Pepper hurried down to the gymnasium to get their wheels. At the last moment Andy discovered that one of his buttons was loose and had to be sewed on, and Jack had trouble with the new cap he was going to wear. It was a trifle too large and he had to place a strip of paper under the band to make it stay on his head properly.

"It certainly feels like snow," said Pepper, as the three got out their bicycles. "I am sure we'll get a snowstorm before long."

"I don't care, if only it holds off till we get back," returned Andy.

They lit the acetylene gas lamps, with which their wheels were provided, and then ran the bicycles down to the roadway.

"Have a good time," cried Stuffer, who had come out to see them off.

"Don't worry about that," replied Pepper, gaily.

"I'll wager you'll have a dandy spread," went on the lad who loved to eat.

"Wish you were along, Stuffer?" asked Jack.

"Do I? Well, now, don't mention it!" and Stuffer's eyes fairly watered in anticipation.

"I'll bring you something if I get the chance," sang out Pepper, as he gave his bicycle a shove and leaped into the saddle. "So-long!"

Jack and Andy followed their chum, and with a parting cry to Stuffer, all three pedaled along the highway leading to Point View Lodge. It was now night, but the three gas-lamps lit up the road so well that they had little difficulty in finding their way.

"We are not due until six o'clock," said Jack. "So we can take it easy. No use of getting into a perspiration over it."

"We'll not sweat much to-night," answered Pepper. "Too cold. I move we keep at it until we reach that old barn near the Lodge. Then we can rest a bit, so that we won't appear at the place all out of breath."

Two miles were covered, and then they came to a place where the highway was unusually rough.

"Let me go ahead and pick the way," sang out Andy, and forged to the front.

"Better slack up a little!" returned the young

major. "No use of taking chances when we have plenty of time."

Scarcely had he uttered the words when there came a cry from the acrobatic youth. His wheel commenced to wobble and twist. Over into some bushes he shot, to fall with a crash in their midst.

"Hello, what's the matter with you?" sang out Pepper, and leaped quickly to the road, an example followed by Jack.

"Bicycle has gone to pieces, I guess," spluttered Andy, as he essayed to scramble out of the bushes.

"Are you hurt?" demanded Jack, anxiously.

"Only a few scratches, Jack. Say, that was a narrow escape, wasn't it?"

"Thought you said your wheel was in good condition," came from Pepper.

"So it was when I looked at it this morning."

"What's wrong now?"

"The handle-bars are loose for one thing. I don't know what else is wrong until I look it over."

The machine was brought forth from the bushes. The lamp-glass had been smashed and the light had gone out. Andy stopped the flow of acetylene gas, and then his chums turned the rays of the other lamps on the disabled bicycle.

"Handle-bars loose and also nuts on the front wheel!" cried Andy, after an examination. "Say, I believe some enemy did this!"

"Who?" questioned the young major.

"I don't know. Maybe Ritter, or Coulter."

"Hurry up and tighten things," cried Pepper. "We don't want to be late."

"Better be late than have a nasty tumble," returned Jack. "While you are at it, Andy, better look the whole machine over carefully."

"I will, Jack. And maybe you had better look your machines over, too."

"Good advice."

While Andy was fixing his bicycle Pepper and the young major inspected their own bicycles.

"Well, I never!" gasped The Imp, as the light fell on his rear wheel. "Another quarter of a mile and I would have had a spill and no mistake!"

"Same here!" came from Jack. "Oh, isn't this the worst yet!"

"What's wrong?" queried the acrobatic youth.

"The back wheel is loose, and two of the sprockets of the sprocket-wheel have been filed down, to let the chain slip," answered Pepper.

"And my handle-bars are loose and the chain all but filed in two," cried Jack. "Boys, this was done on purpose!"

"Of course!" came from both of the others.

"Done by our enemies!"

"Sure."

"Ritter and his cronies."

"Well, we'd have to prove that," answered Andy, slowly.

"Don't you believe it, Andy?"

"I do; but that isn't proof."

"And that isn't getting us to Point View Lodge," came from Pepper. "I guess we'll have to walk!" he added, with something like a groan.

"Walk!" we can't walk that distance," replied the young major.

"Well, we can't trust ourselves on these machines. We might if we had lots of time, but that we haven't got."

The three cadets stared blankly at each other. Here they were on a lonely road, and what to do none of them knew.

"Oh, if I only had Ritter here wouldn't I punch his head good!" muttered Pepper.

"Ritter will keep. Let us look over the machines and make up our minds what is to be done," said Jack.

The more they inspected the wheels the more hopeless appeared the task of fixing them up so they could be used.

"We simply haven't got time to bother with them," announced Jack. "We've got to get to the Lodge some other way."

"Well, what way?" asked Andy.

"I wonder if we could hire a rig at the next farmhouse."

"Well, we can try that," answered Pepper.

Trundling their bicycles, they hurried along the country road until they reached a farmhouse.

"Looks as if they were all out or gone to bed," was Jack's comment, for not a light showed about the place.

"We'll soon know," returned Pepper, and he pounded lustily on the front door.

There was no answer to this summons, and he pounded again. But nobody appeared.

"Gone away for the day, I guess," he said. Now what?"

"Let us leave our wheels in the barn," said Jack. "We can come back for them any time."

This they did, and after a look around the place, to make certain nobody was there, they passed out on the road once more. Pepper looked at his watch.

"Fifteen minutes to six," he announced.

"Oh, we'll never get there on time," groaned Andy.

"We'll be lucky if we get there at all to-night," answered the young major.

"They are looking for us by now," came from Pepper. "Wonder what they will think when we don't show up?"

"They'll think we are pretty mean, I guess," answered the acrobatic youth.

"Here comes some kind of a turnout now!" cried Pepper.

He pointed down the highway. They could see a lantern swinging idly to and fro. It was hung under a farm-wagon, and presently they saw the turnout, drawn by a pair of good-looking horses. The wagon was filled with barrels of potatoes, and on the seat sat a raw-boned old farmer, half asleep.

"Hello, there!" challenged Jack out of the darkness. "Hold up a minute, please!"

"Hi, what's this, a hold-up?" exclaimed the old farmer, and then of a sudden he reached between the barrels of potatoes and brought forth a long horse-pistol and pointed it at them.

"Don't shoot!" cried Pepper, thinking the old fellow might be just scared enough to pull the trigger of his ancient weapon. "This isn't any hold-up."

"Who be you?" and the farmer peered forth anxiously in the darkness.

"We are cadets from Putnam Hall."

"Oh! I see! Waal, don't ye try to play no trick on Ezra Cole, or I'll let fly with this hoss-pistol, sure ez you're born!"

"We don't want to play any tricks, Mr. Cole,"

answered Jack. "We are in trouble, and I was wondering if you could help us out."

"Wot's the trouble?"

In as few words as possible the young major and his chums explained the difficulty. The old farmer listened with interest.

"I know Mr. Ford; he buys garden sass from me," he said.

"We don't know how we are going to get to the Lodge, unless we can find somebody to drive us over," said Pepper. "Could you do it, if we paid you?"

"Wot, with this load o' potatoes? Not much!"

"Couldn't you leave your potatoes here?" asked Andy. "I'll give you fifty cents to drive me over."

"And so will I," added Pepper.

"That will be a dollar and a half for the three of us, Mr. Cole," put in Jack.

"Hum!" The old farmer began to look interested. "It's a putty stiff drive to Point View, an' I'd have to come back fer the potatoes."

"Make it two dollars!" cried Jack. "And do it as quickly as you can."

"Hum! Got the cash with you, young man?"

"Yes, here it is!" And the young major held up two one-dollar bills.

"All right, I'm your man!" cried Ezra Cole. "I ain't in no hurry to git to hum, an' two dollars

ain't picked up every day. Jest wait till I drive in an' leave my potatoes where they will be safe."

"Might leave 'em with our bicycles," said Jack.

"So I will."

It did not take the old farmer long to unload his barrels of potatoes. Then he swept out his farm-wagon and spread some horse-blankets for the boys to sit upon. They leaped in and he took up the lines once more.

"G'lang!" he shouted to his team and cracked his whip, and off they went along the road at a good gait.

"Great Julius Cæsar!" cried Andy, after a quarter of a mile had been passed. "Talk about bumping the bumps! This road has 'em beaten to a frazzle!"

"Getting your money's worth, Andy?" asked The Imp, with a grin.

"Ain't no springs on this wagon!" said Ezra Cole, with a grin. "But don't you mind; it will give you a fine appetite fer that dinner when you git there!"

"It will, if it doesn't knock out our teeth so we can't chew!" murmured Jack.

On and on they rattled at a good pace until the lights of Point View Lodge shone in the distance.

"Just drop us off at the gate!" cried Jack. "We

don't want to ride up to the piazza in such a rig as this."

"Why, hello, have you arrived at last?" cried a voice from out of the darkness, and then Laura and Flossie appeared, standing by the gate. The three cadets looked glumly at each other, and then Pepper commenced to snicker and all burst into a hearty spell of laughter.

CHAPTER XIV

AT THE FORD MANSION

"Don't you admire our very fashionable turnout?" questioned Pepper, as he came forward and shook hands with the girls.

"It's the latest in carriages," came from Andy.

"Oh!" murmured Laura. "Did you really come all the way from Putnam Hall in that?"

"It must have been hard riding," was Flossie's comment.

"No, we didn't come all the way," answered Pepper. "We'll tell you about it later," he added. Then Ezra Cole was paid. The old farmer lost no time in driving away.

As the girls and boys walked slowly toward the mansion the cadets told the particulars of the breakdown on the road.

"And you really think some of your rivals did it?" questioned Laura. "How mean!"

"I'd never speak to them again," added Flossie, with a flash of her eyes.

"Well, we'll talk a whole lot to 'em," answered Pepper, grimly.

"But you have got to prove them guilty first," said Laura.

Once at the mansion the situation was explained to Mr. and Mrs. Ford, and the boys were conducted by a servant to a bathroom, where they might wash and brush up and make themselves otherwise presentable. They did not linger long, and when they came below, the folding-doors to the dining-room were opened and the butler announced dinner.

It was a jolly meal, and the cadets were made to feel perfectly at home. Mr. Ford asked them how they were getting along in school, and was surprised when told that they hoped to graduate from the Hall the following June.

"We shall miss your visits to the Lodge," said Mrs. Ford.

"You'll have to visit us anyway—if you get a chance," said Laura, and all of the cadets said they would remember her kind words. Then they talked about old times, and especially about the time when the boys had visited the Lodge and killed the tiger that had escaped from the circus, as related in "The Putnam Hall Cadets," and of how the girls had visited the cadets in the woods,

when the boys had run away from the Hall, as told of in "The Putnam Hall Rebellion."

"I'd like to go to a boarding-school," said Flossie. "It must be lots of fun!"

"Fun and work, mixed," answered Andy.

After the dinner, over which they took their time, the young folks gathered around the piano and sang and played, and they also had several dances, with the old folks looking on. All too soon it came time for the boys to go back to the Hall.

"I have ordered the auto around," said Rossmore Ford. "John can take you back, and he can also stop for your bicycles, if you wish."

"Thank you very much," answered Jack. "We'll ride home in the auto with pleasure. But I guess we had better let the bicycles rest to-night where they are; eh, fellows?"

"Yes," answered Pepper and Andy.

A little later the cadets said good-night. The big touring car was brought around and they got in the tonneau. Then the chauffeur turned on the power, and away they shot into the darkness, the girls crying a good-by after them.

"Well, we had a dandy time, in spite of the breakdown," remarked the young major.

"But we have got to find out who played this trick on us," came from Pepper.

"That may be easier said than done," said Andy.

"Whoever was mean enough to play such a trick will do his best to lay low."

When the boys got back to the Hall they found that the majority of their friends had gone to bed. Only Stuffer Singleton was up, reading a novel by the light of a wax-candle he had smuggled up to the room.

"Hello! have a good time?" queried the boy who loved to eat, as he cast aside the volume.

"Bang up," answered Jack, and then he went on quickly. "Stuffer, were you near the gym this afternoon?"

"No. Why?"

"Somebody was mean enough to tamper with our bicycles," answered the young major, and gave a few particulars.

"Oh, you can bet it was the Ritter crowd, or Ritter alone," said Stuffer, quickly. "It would be just like them to do their best to spoil your fun."

It was not until two days later that Jack and his chums had a chance to go for their broken-down wheels. They found them exactly as they had been left, and explained to the owner of the barn how they happened to be there.

"It's all right," said the farmer. "You can leave them here a month if you want to." He knew Captain Putnam well, having sold him some straw for the school stables.

The cadets had to trundle the bicycles back to Putnam Hall and then had many hours' work in fixing the wheels so they could be used again.

During those two days the youths made many inquiries, but were unable to get a clue as to who had played the trick. Ritter and Coulter "laid low" and kept out of their way.

Following the game with the Dauntless Club came several other football contests, and Putnam Hall won two games and lost one. Then the weather turned off cold, with a promise of snow in the air.

During those days it must not be supposed that the search for Jack's gold watch and chain was abandoned. It was continued with spirit, but no clue was brought to light.

"It's as much of a mystery as the disappearance of my things when the horse ran away with me," said Andy. "I don't suppose I'll ever hear of those things either."

"Yes, but that was different, Andy," said the young major. "You were on a public highway, where anybody might pick up the things, supposing you merely dropped them. But I was right here, where everybody is supposed to be honest."

"It gives the school a black eye, doesn't it?"

"That's it. I know Captain Putnam feels terrible about it, too."

"Do you suspect any of the hired help?"

"I don't know what to think."

The weather grew colder rapidly, and one morning the cadets arose to find the ground covered with snow to a depth of several inches.

"Hurrah!" shouted Fred. "See the snow! Doesn't it look inviting?"

"Want a roll in it, Fred?" questioned Bart Field.

"Not exactly. I was thinking of a snowball fight."

"That's the talk! Let us get up a fight after school hours!" cried Bart Conners.

"Pepper was at the window. Slyly he raised the sash and scooped up a big handful of snow from the broad ledge outside. Andy was nearby, bending over, lacing up his shoe.

"Welcome to the snow!" cried The Imp, gaily, and let a portion of the frozen mass slip down the acrobatic youth's collar.

"Wow!" snorted Andy, straightening up with a jerk. "Hi, you, what do you take me for, an ice-box?" And he commenced to squirm as the cold snow ran down his backbone. Then he made a dive for Pepper and chased The Imp around the dormitory. Over two of the beds they flew, and then brought up in a corner with a crash.

"Have mercy on the furniture!" cried Joe Nelson.

"Don't knock over the table!" added Stuffer.

"Give me that snow!" cried Andy, and managed to get a small portion from Pepper. "How do you like that?" And he plastered the snow in The Imp's left ear.

"Hurrah! Snow from Snow!" cried Jack.

"'Twill warm Pepper's blood, so it will!" was Emerald Hogan's comment.

More snow had been scooped from the window-sill by Fred and Joe, and soon a battle-royal was in progress in the dormitory. But it came to an abrupt end when Dave Kearney appeared.

"Stop it!" cried the young sergeant. "Crabtree is coming!"

"All over!" whispered Jack. "All as orderly as lambs!" And at once every cadet settled down and started in an orderly fashion to finish his morning toilet.

"What was the noise in here?" demanded Josiah Crabtree, as he threw open the door and strode into the dormitory.

He glared around savagely, but nobody answered him.

"I demand to know what was going on here!" he continued.

"Mr. Crabtree, did you speak to me?" asked Pepper, meekly.

"I spoke to you all!" thundered the teacher. "What were you doing in here?"

"I am dressing, Mr. Crabtree," answered Andy.

"I am dressing, Mr. Crabtree," came from Jack.

"I am dressing, too," put in Fred.

"And so was I dressing," said Stuffer, with a smile.

"And I was dressing," supplemented Pepper. "Come to think of it, I rather fancy we were all dressing. You see, we always do dress when we get up in the morning, Mr. Crabtree," he added with a simple smile.

"I want none of your impudence, Ditmore."

"Oh, dear, was I impudent?" murmured The Imp. "I didn't know it. I beg ten thousand pardons—yes, a million, if you'd rather, sir."

"Be quiet, you—you forward boy! Something was going on in here! If I find out what it was, I shall punish all of you!" And having thus delivered himself, Josiah Crabtree strode out of the dormitory, banging the door after him.

"Isn't he an angel!" murmured Andy.

"The sweetest teacher that ever grew!" returned Pepper.

"I'd like to know how long Captain Putnam will put up with him," was Jack's comment.

"I don't believe it will be very long," answered Fred.

The cadets finished their dressing and hurried below. On account of the storm the morning drill was held in the gymnasium, and then the young soldiers marched to the mess-room. On the way several could not resist the temptation to pick up some snow and throw it at each other.

"Hi, you stop that!" roared Reff Ritter, as a snowball took him in the neck. "Who threw that?" he demanded; but nobody answered him. "I believe it was you, Ditmore!" he went on, turning an ugly look on Pepper.

"That's one for tampering with our bicycles, Ritter," retorted Pepper.

It was a chance shot, taken on the spur of the moment, but it told. Reff Ritter started and turned pale.

"Who—er—told you I—er—tampered with your bicycles?" he stammered.

"Never mind who told me, Ritter. We are going to get square with you, and don't you forget it."

"Who said I touched 'em?" grumbled the bully.

"Never mind about that."

"You are trying to corner me, that what's you are up to!" grumbled Ritter. "But you shan't do it! I never touched your wheels, and you can't prove that I did. Now don't you throw any more

snowballs at me, or I'll report you." And then Ritter hurried into the mess-room as fast as he could.

Pepper, Jack and Andy looked at each other.

"He is guilty, I know it!" said Pepper firmly.

"I believe you," answered the young major; and Andy nodded his head to show that he agreed with his chums.

CHAPTER XV

THE SNOWBALL BATTLE

"Now THEN, fellows, for the greatest snowball battle of the age!"

"Here is where Company A smothers Company B!"

"Rats! You mean that Company B will bury Company A out of sight!"

"Hi, Major Ruddy! What side are you going on?" queried Bart Conners, who still commanded Company B.

"He is coming on our side!" answered Henry Lee, the captain of the other company.

"Well, I can't fight on both sides," answered the young major with a laugh.

"Go with the company that wins!" suggested Pepper, with a grin.

"Toss up a cent for it," suggested Andy.

"All right, I'll toss up," answered Jack, and did so, and it was decided that he should fight with Company B.

"Good enough!" cried Pepper, who was in that command. "Now Company A is licked, sure!"

"Not much!" was the answer from Stuffer Singleton. "We'll win, sure!"

"We will, unless you stop to eat a doughnut!" put in Joe Nelson, and at this remark a general laugh went up, for Stuffer had once lost a long-distance running race because he stopped on the way to devour some cookies he had in his pocket.

It was after school hours, and the cadets had gathered on the field where, during the summer, corn had been raised. It was to be a battle between the two companies of the school battalion, with the company captain as leader on each side.

The preliminary rules were speedily arranged. Lines were drawn at either end of the field, about five hundred feet apart. In the center, about a hundred feet apart, two other lines were drawn. Along the latter lines the cadets arranged themselves.

"Now then, fighting will begin when the school-bell rings out four!" cried the cadet who had been made referee. "The company that chases the other company over its back line wins the contest. No fighting with anything but snow allowed. Anybody using his fists, or a stone, or a lump of ice, will be ruled out of the contest."

With all possible speed the young soldiers

started to supply themselves with snowballs, and soon each had ten to twenty in his hands and pockets and under his arms or at his feet.

"Get ready!" shouted Bart, as he glanced hastily at his watch.

"Give it to 'em hot when the bell rings!" came from Henry Lee.

Half a minute more and the Hall bell commenced to toll out the hour. The bell had not yet ceased to ring when there came a grand shower of snowballs from each company. The shower was so thick that a few of the snowballs hit each other.

"Forward!" shouted Captain Bart.

"Forward!" echoed Captain Henry.

And then the two long lines of cadets rushed forward over the snow-covered field until they were within thirty or forty feet of each other. Then came another shower of snowballs.

"Wow!" yelled one cadet. "Oh, my nose!"

"Cæsar's helmet! That hit me in the eye!" came from another.

"Say, don't try to knock out all my teeth!" added a third.

"Charge!" yelled the captain of Company A. "Charge! Get 'em on the run right now!"

"Stand firm!" came from the commander of Company B. "Now then, fire!"

The rush of Company A was met with an extra

heavy volley of snowballs. The cadets staggered under the onslaught and then came to a halt.

"Now then, up and at 'em!" yelled Captain Bart. And yelling like wild Indians, his command charged on Company A. The snowballs flew thick and fast, and slowly but surely Company A was forced to give ground until it stood on the line from which it had started. But by that time Company B was out of ammunition and had to pause to manufacture more snowballs.

In the ranks of Company A were Ritter, Coulter and Paxton. Paxton had of late somewhat dropped the others, but Reff and Gus were as thick as ever. They were now standing side by side.

"Say, I'd like to give it to Ruddy and those others," muttered Coulter.

"So would I," whispered Ritter in return. "Confound 'em, I'd like to know if they really know the truth about the bicycles."

"I don't see how they found out; nobody was around when you fixed 'em up."

"Maybe somebody was spying; that sneak of a Mumps, for instance."

"If he was, and told on us, I'll fix him for it."

Both cadets were making snowballs near a hollow. As Ritter scraped the snow up he uncovered several jagged stones.

"Say, look here!" he whispered, and pointed at

the stones. "Let's fix up some special snowballs for Ruddy & Company!" he added with a knowing look at his crony.

"All right; but be careful you are not caught," answered Gus Coulter.

Both cadets got down close to the jagged stones and adroitly slipped several of them into the snowballs they were making.

"Wait till we are pretty close," directed Ritter. "Then let drive for all you are worth."

"Who will you aim at?"

"Ruddy and Ditmore."

"All right, I'll aim at Snow; and I'll let Ruddy have one, too."

Again came a ringing war-cry, and in a moment more the battle was continued. Back and forth swayed the lines of cadets, first towards one end of the field and then towards the other. It was plainly to be seen that the commands were about evenly matched.

"How long is this battle to last?" questioned Joe Nelson.

"Half an hour," answered Fred Century, who was beside him.

"Time is almost up, then," came from Bert Field, who had been fighting so hard he was almost out of breath.

"Five minutes more!" came from the referee.

"Now then, if either side is going to do something, pitch in!"

"Forward!" came simultaneously from both captains, and forward plunged Company A and Company B, and the snowballs commenced to fly as thickly as before. Neither side would give ground, and at last the two lines were within fifteen to twenty feet of each other, right in the center of the field.

The time was almost up, and each command was getting rid of the last of the snowballs, when Jack saw a snowball leave Coulter's hand and sail swiftly towards Pepper. The Imp did not see it until it was quite close to him and failed in his attempt to dodge. The snowball hit him full in the temple and over he went as if struck with a club.

"Pepper!" cried the young major in horror, and started to rush to his chum's assistance, when another snowball came flying through the air. It struck Jack over the ear, and he, too, went down, all but knocked unconscious.

A bugle blew, and the great snowballing contest came to an end.

"A tie! A tie!" was the cry. "Neither side wins!"

"Let the two captains shake hands and call it off!" said one cadet.

"I'm willing!" cried Bart, readily.

"So am I," added Henry, and then the pair shook hands, while a great cheer rolled up from both sides. But the cheer came to an abrupt end when Fred Century cried out:

"Pepper Ditmore is hurt!"

"And so is Major Ruddy!" came from Emerald Hogan.

A crowd quickly gathered around each wounded cadet. Pepper had a nasty cut over the left eye and Jack had a lump behind his right ear.

"They must have been hit with soakers," was Dale's comment, as he bent over Pepper.

"Looks as if Pepper was hit with a stone," came from Andy.

"A stone!" cried Bart Field.

"Yes, a stone! That cut was never made by a snowball, or a piece of ice, either!"

"Shall I get a doctor?" asked Stuffer, anxiously.

"Oh, are they as bad as that?" asked Bob Grenwood.

"I don't know," answered Bert, soberly. "Wait a minute and we'll see if they come around."

"Oh, what a crack!" murmured Jack, and then he sat up and stared around him. Pepper was also stirring and he slowly put one hand to the cut on his temple.

"Let us carry 'em to the Hall," suggested Bert.

"It's getting too cold out here and besides, they are all in a sweat from the snowballing."

When Pepper was picked up, Andy saw something lying beneath him in the snow. He picked it up.

"Hello! look here!" he called out, and held the object up.

"A stone!"

"Where did it come from, Andy?"

"It was under Pepper's body. I believe it was in the snowball that hit him!"

"Who would be so mean?"

"I rather guess I know," answered Pepper, and looked around for Ritter and Coulter, but the bully and his crony had disappeared.

Pepper and Jack were carried tenderly into the Hall and placed in easy chairs in the reception room. Presently both had recovered consciousness fully, and each had his head bound up in bandages.

"Phew, but that was a crack I got!" sighed The Imp. "I thought a rock had hit me!"

"It was Coulter who threw that snowball," said the young major. "I saw him do it, and I was running to help you up when I got struck myself, and went down."

"And I am pretty sure Ritter hit you, Jack,"

came from Andy. "Anyway, I saw him aiming for you just before you staggered and fell."

"Andy, those fellows must have hit us with stones!" muttered The Imp.

"I feel sure they did. Ritter struck me with a snowball, on the hand, and it left a deep scratch. Now, no ordinary snowball would do that. Besides that, I picked up a sharp stone from where Pepper was lying."

"It was against the rules of the contest to use stones," put in Dale, who was near.

"Sure it was!" cried Stuffer. "If those chaps really used stones they ought to be punished for it."

The news quickly went the rounds, as was to be expected. When Henry Lee heard it he quickly sought out Captain Bart.

"I hope you don't think I allowed any such underhand work," he said anxiously.

"Not for a minute, Henry!" cried the captain of Company B. "If Ritter and Coulter did it, they did it on their own responsibility. I think them just mean enough, too, for they are down on Major Ruddy and Pepper Ditmore."

"If they are guilty, I'd like to have them court-martialed!" muttered the commander of Company A. "Such underhand work is a disgrace to Putnam Hall!"

"Wait and see if it can be proven," answered Bart Conners. "Then, if it is proven, we'll read Ri ter and Coulter a lecture they won't forget in a h urry!" he added significantly.

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH MORE VALUABLES VANISH

That night it snowed again, and in the morning the storm raged furiously around Putnam Hall, so that the landscape on all sides was completely blotted out. The cadets had to remain indoors, and it was hard work to keep a path clear to the gymnasium and the stables.

"We'll be snowbound and no mistake," observed Andy. "Well, I don't care much; it will give me a chance to catch up in my lessons."

"Very far behind, Andy?" asked Jack.

"More than I like to think about, Jack. I want to graduate with honor, you know."

"Oh, we all want to do that."

"How's the head?"

"Still sore. But I guess I'll be all right again in a few days."

"How about you, Pepper?"

"I'll be all right, too, Andy. But it was a fierce

crack!" added Pepper, as his hand went up gingerly to his plastered-up cut.

"Going to lodge a complaint against Ritter and Coulter?"

"What good would it do? We can't actually prove that they used stones?"

"Let it pass. If we make a complaint it will only stir up more bad blood," said the young major. "But in the future I am going to watch Ritter and Coulter pretty closely."

The boys were kept at the Hall for all of that week, getting no further than the gymnasium for recreation. The wind blew furiously at times, so that the snow was piled up into numerous drifts, one reaching almost to the top of the carriage-shed, and another completely hiding the posts of the gate entrance.

"This must be tough on some of the farmers," observed Dale. "Think of trying to get the milk to the station in such weather."

"Well, a farmer usually has enough to eat," answered Stuffer. "That counts for a good deal. Now if a fellow was snowbound and didn't have any grub——" He did not finish but shook his head dolefully. To Stuffer such a fate was beyond words.

As was to be expected, Ritter and Coulter kept out of the way of Jack and Pepper. Once the

young major met the pair on the stairs, but they simply glared at him and passed on before he could say a word.

During all this time Captain Putnam had been doing his best to solve the mystery concerning the disappearance of Jack's gold watch and chain. But, though all the hired help and the cadets and teachers were watched and questioned, nothing of importance came to light. Peleg Snuggers said he had once seen a strange man near the stables, and Captain Putnam wondered if that individual could have sneaked into the school and committed the robbery.

"But if he did that, why didn't he take more?" he said, in speaking of the matter to George Strong.

"I am sure I don't know, sir," answered the teacher. "For the matter of that, why wouldn't any thief take more, if he had the chance?"

"I give it up, Strong. This thing makes me feel sick."

"Well, we must keep our eyes open," answered George Strong; and then the conversation changed to the lessons for the next day.

On Tuesday morning, Pepper chanced to go to a bureau-drawer in which he kept his collars, cuffs, neckties and jewelry. He commenced to look for

something and ended by turning out everything in the compartment.

"What's wrong, Pepper?" asked Jack. "Lost some diamonds?"

"It's my ruby scarfpin, Jack. Did you see it?"

"No, not for some time. Did you have it in that drawer?"

"I did."

"When did you wear it last?"

"The night we took dinner with the Fords."

"Are you sure you put it back when you came home?"

"Positive. I keep it in this case," and Pepper held up an empty jewelry case.

"Gracious! This is becoming interesting!" murmured the young major. "First my watch and chain and now your scarfpin!" He looked pointedly at his chum. "Pepper, do you think——" He stopped short.

"Think what, Jack?"

"Oh, I'd hate to say it, Pepper," and the young major shrugged his shoulders.

"Were you going to mention Ritter and Coulter?"

"I was. But maybe it wouldn't be fair. It's a terrible thing to think anybody a thief."

"That is true. But maybe they took them as a joke and hid them."

"That is past a joke."

Pepper continued to hunt around until it was time to go below. Then he marched straight to Captain Putnam's private office.

The captain listened with a sinking heart to what the cadet had to say. It was terrible to think that a thief was at large in the school and could not be caught.

"You are positive that you had the scarfpin when you came home, Ditmore?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir."

"And you put it in the case in the drawer?"

"I did."

"Was the drawer locked?"

"Part of the time. Sometimes I forgot and left the key in the lock."

"What sort of a scarfpin was it?"

"It was a sort of a clover effect, of gold, with a ruby and three small diamonds."

"And how much was it worth?"

"I believe my mother paid thirty-five dollars for it. It was a Christmas gift, so I am not sure about the value."

"Well, take another look for it and report to me again to-morrow," answered Captain Putnam, with a heavy sigh. Then, of a sudden, he added: "Do you suspect anybody of taking the scarfpin?"

"I have no clue whatever to the theft," answered Pepped, slowly.

"But have you any suspicions, Ditmore?" And the master's voice grew a trifle stern.

"Only in a general way."

"Please explain yourself."

"I—er—I hardly know what to say, sir," stammered Pepper. "There may be nothing in it at all."

"In what? Come, out with it."

"Why, you see, sir, some of the cadets in this school are not good friends with me and Major Ruddy, and maybe they thought they would play a trick on us by taking his watch and chain and my scarfpin."

"Humph! a mighty poor trick! Who are those cadets."

"I don't want to accuse them, Captain Putnam."

"I understand. But who are the cadets?"

"Reff Ritter and Gus Coulter."

"Oh, yes, I remember now. You and Major Ruddy have had quite some trouble with them in the past."

"Yes, sir. But I'd hate to think they did such a mean thing as this," added Pepper, hastily.

"Well, take a look around and report again tomorrow," returned Captain Putnam; and then closed his desk slowly and thoughtfully.

Pepper did take a look around, but it was of no use. Not a trace of the missing scarfpin could be found.

"This certainly beats the nation!" remarked Dale, when the cadets were talking the affair over. "First Andy loses his jewelry, then Jack, and now Pepper. Wonder if I hadn't better put my cuff-links in the captain's safe?" And he cut a wry face. "They cost me a dollar and a quarter."

"I'll wager Captain Putnam would give a good deal to catch the thief," remarked Stuffer. "Say, Pep, I hope you don't suspect anybody in this dormitory?" he added anxiously.

"No, Stuffer," was the quick answer. Then Pepper broke into a grin. "Of course, if it was a doughnut, or a pie, I'd suspect you right off!"

"Huh! It's no crime to take something to eat!" grunted Stuffer.

"I'd hate to think any cadet was guilty," came from Emerald. "'Twould blacken the character of the whole school, so it would!"

"Well, Jack and Pepper have some bitter enemies," said Dale, significantly. And all present knew to whom he referred.

"Well, you can't always tell," said Dale, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

At that moment Fred Century came hurrying into the dormitory.

"Have you heard the latest news?" he cried.

"No, what is it?" questioned Andy.

"Maybe we are going to have an extra holiday," suggested Pepper.

"Better yet, maybe old Crabtree has resigned," added Jack.

"Perhaps Fred is going to give us a spread," came from Stuffer. "I'd like that first-rate."

"No, the news is more important than all that," came from Fred.

"Well, what is it, Fred?"

"Don't keep us on pins and needles any longer!"

"Well, the news is, that there have been more robberies committed here," answered Fred.

"More robberies!" came from half a dozen throats.

"Yes. The teachers were going to keep the thing quiet, but it leaked out through Mumps and Nick Paxton.

"What has been taken now?" asked Jack, curiously.

"A watch, a scarfpin, and a five-dollar gold piece."

"And who was robbed?" burst out Andy.

"The watch was taken from Paxton, the scarfpin from Ritter, and Coulter lost the five-dollar gold piece."

"Is it possible!" murmured the young major,

and then he looked meaningly at his chums. Here was news indeed!

"When did you learn of this, Fred?" asked Dale.

"Just a few minutes ago. Mumps told me, and Paxton told Frank Barringer. Ritter, Coulter and Paxton went to the office to report. Mumps said Ritter was as mad as hops. Ritter's watch was only a silver affair, but he says it came down to him from his grandfather and was valuable as an heirloom."

"Well, this is certainly getting interesting," was Pepper's comment. "If that thief isn't caught he'll end up by cleaning out the whole school."

"After this, I am going to hide my valuables," said Dale.

"Ditto here," cried Stuffer. "I haven't got much, but what I own I want to keep."

A little later the cadets filed out of the dormitory, leaving Jack, Pepper and Andy together.

"Well, I am mighty glad I didn't accuse Ritter and Coulter," said the young major. "This puts something of a different light on the subject."

"But who is guilty, do you think?" asked Andy.

"I don't know what to think," answered the young major.

"This will drive Captain Putnam wild," came from Pepper. And he was right; the master of

the Hall was worried as he had never been worried before. He made a rigid investigation, but it brought nothing new to light. According to the stories told by Ritter, Coulter and Paxton the articles stolen had been taken from their bureau-drawers, and that was all those cadets could tell about the mysterious affair.

"We must set a strict watch, Captain Putnam," said George Strong.

"And we must catch that thief," added Josiah Crabtree, sourly. "I—I shall be almost afraid to go to sleep after this!" he added nervously.

"If these thefts keep on I don't know what I am going to do," said Captain Putnam, and his voice had a sound of despair in it.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TUG-OF-WAR

For several days nothing was talked of at Putnam Hall but the mysterious disappearance of the students' watches and jewelry. The cadets could not get the matter off their minds, and as a consequence recitations became very poor.

"I shall offer a substantial reward," said Captain Putnam, and one afternoon a notice was posted in the school proper and in the gymnasium, offering one hundred dollars for information leading to the capture of the thief.

"Say, I shouldn't mind earning that reward!" murmured Dale.

"A fellow could have no end of a good time on a hundred dollars!" murmured Stuffer. "Think what a spread he could give!" And his eyes sparkled in anticipation.

"It would be a bad thing for Stuffer to get the reward," came from Andy.

"Why, I'd like to know?" demanded that cadet.

"Because you'd eat yourself into a state of acute indigestion."

"Rats! I don't eat any more than you do," grumbled Stuffer.

"Well, I don't see any chance of your getting the reward," was Jack's comment. "That thief had hidden his tracks well."

With the deep snow on the ground, drills had to be held in the gymnasium, and several contests were also arranged. The cadets got up a tug-of-war between one team headed by Pepper and another headed by Dale, and the excitement over this contest waged so high that the thefts were, for the time being, forgotten.

The tug-of-war was held late one afternoon in the gymnasium. A line was drawn on the floor and the long rope laid across this. On either side wooden cleats were nailed down, so that the contestants might brace their feet.

The two teams consisted of eight cadets each. With Pepper were Andy, Jack, and Fred Century, while on Dale's side were Bart Field, Bart Conners and some other cadets already introduced.

"Now, then, Pepper!" cried one of his friends. "See what you can do!"

"Don't give him a chance, Dale! Yank him right over the line!" cried one of Dale's friends.

"I'll bet Pepper Ditmore loses," said Nick

Paxton, who was present. Ritter and Coulter had said they did not consider a tug-of-war between such teams worth witnessing.

Frank Barringer was timekeeper and referee, and at the appointed hour he made both teams line up and and catch hold of the rope.

"All ready?" he asked.

There was a moment of silence.

"Drop!" was the cry, and on the instant both teams tightened their holds on the rope and dropped down on the wooden cleats.

"Hold them, Pepper!"

"Don't let 'em haul you up, Dale!"

"Glue yourself down, Jack!"

"Stone foundation, Fred! Stone foundation!"

So the cries ran on, as the two tug-of-war teams held on to the long rope like grim death, each team determined not to give in an inch.

For fully five minutes the rope remained as when the teams had first dropped. Then, of a sudden, Dale gave a hiss and up came his men, to haul in on the rope several inches and then drop as before.

"Hurrah! that's the way to do it!"

"Every inch counts, boys!"

"Watch your chance for another!"

"Get it back, Pepper! Get it back!"

There followed another tense strain. Then

Dale's team came up once more and brought the rope in another six inches.

"That's the way to do it! Now then, a good, stiff pull and you'll have 'em over!"

"Wake up, Pepper! It's time you and your men got on the job!" cried Henry Lee.

"I knew Dale's team would win," said Paxton.

Hardly had Paxton spoken when Dale's team came up for another haul. But this time Pepper and his men were on the alert, and in a twinkling they commenced to haul in—six inches, a foot, a foot and a half and then two feet—and then they dropped, the strain being as much as they could stand.

"Hurrah! Look at that!"

"They got back all they lost and more!"

"Hold 'em, Dale! Stone foundation!"

A great many cries arose. Dale and his supporters braced back as well as they could. Then Dale gave the word to come up for another haul.

Back and forth went the rope, the center knot first on one side of the line and then on the other. For several minutes it looked as if Dale's team might win. But then the tide turned again, and with a strength that was surprising, Pepper's team gave "a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together," and brought the center knot over the winning line.

"Hurrah! Pepper Ditmore's team wins!"

"Say, that was a great tug, wasn't it?"

"My foot slipped!" said one of Dale's supporters.

"So did mine," same from a cadet on the other side.

"It was a fair contest," said Frank Barringer. "Pepper Ditmore's team wins. My private opinion is, both sides did well," he added.

"They certainly did," was Mr. Strong's comment. He had watched the contest with interest.

After the tug-of-war came a contest on the flying rings. Here Andy was in his element, and the acrobatic youth easily outdistanced all of his competitors.

"Very good, indeed, Snow," said the gymnastic instructor. "Really, you go at it as if you were a professional."

"Say, Andy, some day you can join the circus," suggested the young major.

"Maybe his folks came from a circus," sneered Nick Paxton. "It isn't fair to ring in a professional."

"Sour grapes, Paxton!" cried Stuffer. "You know that Andy Snow's father is a business man in the city. Andy just takes to gymnastic exercises, that's all."

"Humph! I don't think such an exhibition much!"

"Just the same, Paxton, you'd give a good deal to do as well," retorted the youth who loved to eat, and turned his back on the other cadet.

Thanksgiving came and went in another storm. The snow was so deep that getting away from the Hall was out of the question, so those who had planned to go home for the holiday were somewhat disappointed. But Captain Putnam provided good cheer in abundance, with plenty of turkey and cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie and nuts. For the evening the boys got up an entertainment in the assembly room, with monologues and dialogues, and also some singing by the school Glee Club, and some very good violin and mandolin playing. Pepper, Jack and Andy took part in the entertainment, and everybody but Josiah Crabtree enjoyed the exhibition. Crabtree did not believe in such "tomfoolery," as he expressed it, and told Captain Putnam the cadets should have given a Shakespearian recital, or something like that, instead.

"Perhaps so, Mr. Crabtree," answered the master of the Hall. "But as the boys are virtually snowed in, I thought I'd let them have a little fun."

After Thanksgiving the cadets settled down to

the grind once more, counting the days to Christmas, when they could go home for two weeks.

"I've got to go to Cedarville," said Jack, one afternoon, after the snowstorm had cleared away. "Who will go along? I am going to walk it, just for the exercise."

"I'll go!" cried Pepper.

"So will I!" added Andy. "Where are you going?"

"To the shoe shop and the postoffice."

The three cadets were soon on the way, Fred Century and Bert Field pelting them with snowballs as they left. It was cold but clear, and all were in the best of spirits.

"I see they've got a new man of all work around the school," observed Pepper, as the three trudged on. "I hope Captain Putnam doesn't think of discharging Peleg Snuggers."

"That new man is a sly kind of a fellow," came from Andy. "I was walking through the hallway last evening and he came up behind me as silently as a cat after a mouse."

"I've got my own idea about that man of all work," said the young major, with a faint smile.

"What do you mean, Jack?"

"If I tell you, will you keep it to yourself, both of you?"

"Sure!" was the prompt answer.

"Well, I don't think John Smith is a man of all work at all."

"He isn't?" cried Andy. "Then what is he?"

"I think he is a private detective."

"Oh, Jack! can that be possible!" ejaculated Pepper. "But it must be so, for I watched the fellow last evening, and he didn't do much work, and he didn't seem to like it that I had an eye on him."

"Of course, if he is a detective, Captain Putnam has engaged him to clear up this mystery of the robberies," said Andy. "Well, I don't blame the captain, for this is surely going to give the school a bad name."

"Don't breathe a word of this to any one," went on Jack. "Of course, if the thief knew a detective was so near he'd be more on guard than ever."

"I only hope he gets the rascal, whoever he is."

"Wonder if it can be one of the cadets?" mused Andy.

"I don't know. It is either some cadet or else one of the hired help. But it is an awful state of affairs," answered Jack.

"By the way, Jack, how about the new election of officers?" said Pepper, a little later. "Going to try for the majorship again?"

"No. Why should I? I've been major long

enough. I believe in giving the other fellows a show."

"Who, for instance?"

"Well, I'd like to see Bart Conners made major. He's one of the best soldiers we have, and he keeps Company B up to the scratch."

"Bart is all right. But what about the other fellows?"

"Well, I am not so anxious about the captaincies. Let the best fellows win."

"I think Reff Ritter would like to be a captain or major."

"He never will be—he can't get the support. Why, hardly any of the cadets go with Reff any more. Even Paxton seems to have dropped him. About the only close friend he has is Gus Coulter."

"Maybe the boys have dropped him because his father is no longer rich."

"No, I don't think that, for quite a number of the cadets are far from rich and yet they are considered good fellows. It's Ritter's ways. He is too domineering. The fellows won't stand for his bullying manner."

"When does the election take place?"

"The tenth day of December—a week from next Wednesday."

"And you are sure you don't want to run again, Jack?"

"Yes, quite sure, Pepper. You can run if you want to." And the young major smiled broadly.

"Not for me!" cried The Imp. "I'd rather have my fun. And, by the way, I've got an idea for some fun with old Crabtree," he added suddenly.

"What is it?" questioned Andy, eagerly.

Pepper closed one eye suggestively.

"Just you wait and see," he answered. "Crabtree is going to wake up to a big surprise some morning—and when he does, well, maybe he'll stop chewing his victuals for awhile!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A CURIOUS MEETING

As THE cadets were good walkers it did not take them long to cover the distance to Cedarville. They stopped at a shoe store, and at a candy store for some chocolates, and then started for the post-office.

"I guess Jack is looking for a letter from his best girl," remarked Pepper, with a grin.

"Maybe you're looking for a letter yourself," returned the young major.

"No such luck," and The Imp heaved a deep sigh. "None of the girls ever write to me."

"Rats!" came from Andy. "I saw you get a letter from Flossie Ford only a few days ago."

"I am looking for a check from dad," said Jack. "I want it to buy Christmas presents with."

"So early?"

"Better early than too late."

"That's true."

The three cadets entered the local postoffice. As

they did so they came face to face with a big cadet, who was carrying a dress-suit case.

"Why, see, it's Dan Baxter!" cried Andy.

"Hello, Baxter, coming back to Putnam Hall?" queried the young major.

"I am," was the short answer of the bully.

"Been away quite awhile," put in Pepper.

"Yes," answered Baxter, shortly, and without another word he hurried out of the postoffice.

"Not very sociable," remarked Jack, dryly.

"He acts as if he had something on his mind," said Pepper.

"I wonder if he will be as bullying as he used to be," mused Andy.

"If he is, he'll get punched," answered Pepper. He had not forgotten his former encounters with Dan Baxter.

"It's queer that Baxter and Ritter don't hit it off better," said Pepper, while Jack was asking about letters. "They seem to be two of a kind."

"They are in some ways," answered Andy. "But, somehow, I think Ritter is the worse of the two."

In a moment the young major came up. He was smiling broadly.

"Here's the letter from dad, and what do you think? He sent me a check for ten dollars more than I asked for! Isn't that fine?"

"Best ever," answered Pepper.

"I'd like the same kind of a check," returned Andy.

"While you are wishing, make it double the amount—it doesn't cost any more," chattered The Imp.

From the postoffice the cadets strolled down the main street of the village, and then turned a corner near which were some new buildings.

"There is another cadet!" cried Jack, pointing ahead. "Hello, where is he going?"

He and his chums looked and saw the boy in the uniform of a Putnam Hall student enter an unfinished building. He was accompanied by a heavy-set man wearing a long overcoat and a soft hat. The two were in earnest conversation.

"That looked like Reff Ritter to me," cried Pepper.

"It was Ritter," answered Andy.

"Who was the man?" asked the young major.

"That is what I want to know!" cried Andy. "Say, I'm going to follow them!"

The acrobatic youth was plainly excited, and his chums could not help but notice it.

"What are you going to follow them for, Andy?" asked Jack.

"I want to see that man."

"Do you know him?"

"I don't know—yet. I want to find out."

"If we follow them Ritter will think it mighty queer," was Pepper's comment.

"I don't care—I want to get a good look at that man," answered Andy, doggedly.

The acrobatic youth led the way and his chums felt compelled to follow. Ritter and the stranger had passed between two buildings. They found a side doorway of one structure wide open, and stepped into a lathed but unplastered hallway. Andy bounded up on an unfinished front piazza and stepped through an open casement into a lathed but unplastered parlor.

"Shall we follow?" asked Pepper of Jack.

"Might as well," returned the young major. "Andy may get into trouble with Ritter, and if so we want to be on hand to help him."

Ritter and the man were talking in a low tone, so that what was said could not be overheard. They had stepped into the house to get out of the keen wind that had sprung up. Andy tiptoed his way across the unfinished parlor and applied his eye to a crack where a lath was missing. He watched until the man shoved back his soft hat and turned his face around. Then he uttered a low cry.

"See anything, Andy?" whispered Pepper.

"That man—he's the same fellow—I feel sure of it!" gasped the acrobatic youth.

"What are you talking about?"

"That man! Don't you remember how the horse ran away with me and I got caught in the tree and was knocked unconscious? Don't you remember my telling how I had seen a man ahead of me just before the accident? Well, that is the man!"

"Are you sure?"

"I think so. Of course, I didn't get a very good look at him—I had my hands full with the horse. But I think that is the man."

"Then maybe he robbed you, Andy!"

"Maybe he did."

"Don't say that unless you are sure of it," warned Jack. "It's a serious accusation and may get you into trouble."

"Oh, I know enough to go slow," answered the acrobatic youth.

Ritter and the stranger had turned to the rear of the house and the watchers saw something passed between them. Then, a minute later, Ritter turned and hurried off by a back way, while the stranger turned to leave by the way he had come.

Andy was undecided what to do, and while he

still hesitated the man came through to the front of the house.

"Hello!" he cried, as he caught sight of the three cadets. "What are you doing here?"

"Perhaps we might ask the same question," returned Jack, as he saw that Andy did not know what to say.

"Have you been following me?" demanded the man, suspiciously.

"Why should we follow you?" asked Pepper.

"No reason at all, so far as I know. I only asked the question," and now the man tried to speak as carelessly as possible.

"I saw you come in here a few minutes ago and I followed, because I want to speak to you," said Andy, shoving to the front and eyeing the fellow closely.

"What do you wish to speak about?"

"Haven't I met you before?"

At these words the man started, but quickly recovered.

"I don't think so," he answered slowly, looking Andy straight in the eyes. "You see, I am a stranger in Cedarville."

"Didn't I meet you in September, on the road back of Putnam Hall school?" asked the acrobatic youth, sharply.

"In September?" The man shook his head

slowly. "No, I wasn't here in September—I was in Boston."

"You are sure about that?" demanded Andy.

"Certainly I am sure," growled the man. "Do you doubt my word?"

"If it wasn't you it was a man who looks very much like you," said Andy, pointedly. "Will you tell me your name?"

"It's none of your business, boy! I never met you, and that settles it. I'm in a hurry now, I've got to get to Ithaca, so I'll thank you to let me pass." And so speaking the stranger brushed forward. Andy put out his hand, as if to detain him, but then changed his mind. In a moment more the man was hurrying down the street. He turned the nearest corner without looking back.

"I believe he is the same fellow, and I believe he robbed me!" cried Andy.

"Possibly he is, but you are not sure of it," answered the young major. "And it would be foolhardy to have him arrested when you have no evidence against him."

"He acted as if he was scared," came from Pepper. "That growl of his was all put on."

"I wish I had forced him to give me his name and address."

"That's true."

"You can get that from Reff Ritter."

"Providing Ritter will give it," added Jack. "He may be as backward about it as the man was himself."

"Why should he be, if the man is honest?"

"Perhaps he won't want it known that he met the man," said Pepper. "He came in here rather sneakingly."

"Where did Ritter go?"

"To the Hall, most likely. It's time we got back, too."

The three cadets left the vicinity of the unfinished buildings and were soon on the way to the school. As they trudged along they talked over what had happened, and also discussed the arrival of Dan Baxter.

"Baxter will try to stir things up," said Jack. And he was right, the bully did stir up the whole school, but it was not until the next term, after the young major had left.

About half the distance to Putnam Hall had been covered when the three cadets discovered a crowd ahead of them.

"Who are those fellows?" asked Pepper.

"Pornell Academy lads," announced Andy. "And see, they have spotted us!"

He was right, the other crowd, nine strong, were students from Pornell. They were led by Roy Bock and a fellow named Grimes. They had

been good-naturedly snowballing each other, but now they stopped.

"Three Putnam Hall cadets!" cried Bock. "Come on, fellows, here's a chance for sport."

"Let's snowball 'em good and proper!" exclaimed Grimes.

"Everybody on the jump!" yelled another Pornell youth.

"Let's surround 'em," was the suggestion offered.

"We'll hammer the daylights out of 'em," came from one lad, who could only be brave when backed up by a crowd.

"Yes, surround 'em, don't let 'em get away!" cried Bock. "Come on!" And he led the way on the run, making snowballs as he moved.

CHAPTER XIX

ABOUT A SET OF TEETH

"I AM afraid we are in for it!" whispered the young major, as he saw the rush of the Pornell students, each armed with all the snowballs he could carry.

"Shall we run away?" asked Andy. "I guess we can run as fast as they can."

"Never!" replied Pepper. "I am going to the Hall and on this road."

"So am I!" added Jack.

"Then let us rush 'em," suggested Andy. "We can't stand and fight nine of 'em—we'll be snowed under."

"Rush it is," returned the young major. "Wait till I give the signal."

On came the enemy, and soon the snowballs were flying at a lively rate. It was growing dark, but the aim of the Pornell students was good and the chums were hit several times. They threw

snowballs in return, hitting Bock in the breast and Grimes in the chin.

"Come on, throw 'em over!" roared Bock. "Roll 'em in the snow!"

"And stuff some snow down their backs!" added Grimes.

"Now then, all together!" cried Jack. "Keep as close as possible! One, two, three!"

Side by side the three chums bounded forward, straight for the line of Pornellites. They came on swiftly and took the enemy by surprise. Jack bumped into Bock, hurling him flat, and Pepper bowled over Grimes. Andy bent low and caught another student by the legs, sending him over into a fourth, and both went flat. Then the three cadets caught a fifth and ran him along the road and into a hollow, where he went into snow up to his waist.

"Stop 'em! Stop 'em!" was the cry, but the Putnam Hall boys could not be stopped. Turning, they delivered a parting shower of snowballs, and then ran on, in the direction of the school.

"I guess the Pornell fellows will remember that for awhile," panted Pepper, when they felt safe.

"And just think of it—three to nine!" chuckled Andy.

"They thought they had us dead to rights,"

came from Jack. "Well, I guess we showed them a trick or two they won't forget right away."

"Are they following us?" asked the acrobatic youth, looking back.

"I reckon not," replied Pepper. "Must have had enough," and he smiled broadly.

The three cadets were tired out from their long walk and the contest on the road, and when the school was reached all were glad enough to sit down and rest previous to having supper. Andy looked around for Reff Ritter, but that cadet kept himself out of sight.

"I'll see him after supper," said the acrobatic youth.

It was not until nearly bedtime that he got a chance to question the bully. He followed Ritter up to his dormitory, which chanced just then to be unoccupied.

"Reff, I want to talk to you," he said, when the bully was on the point of closing the door in his face.

"What do you want, Andy Snow? I'm not feeling well to-night, and I am tired out from a walk I took to Cedarville."

"I won't keep you long, Reff. I want to ask you about the man you met in Cedarville? What's his name?"

Reff Ritter stopped short and showed that the question took him by surprise.

"Man I met?" he stammered.

"Yes, the man you met at the new buildings in Cedarville."

"Who said I met any one?"

"We saw you, I and Major Ruddy and Pep Ditmore."

"Huh! Been spying on me, eh?" And Reff Ritter's face took on its old look of sourness.

"It was an accident. But I want to know who that man was."

"What for?"

"I have my reasons."

"I don't see that I am called on to answer your questions, Andy Snow. If I want to meet anybody I'll do it."

"Then you refuse to tell me who the man was?"

"Tell me why you want to know and maybe I'll tell you who he is," answered the bully, after studying the acrobatic youth's face for a moment.

"Very well. Do you remember the time the horse ran away with me and left me unconscious on the road?"

"I heard about it."

"Well, just before I was knocked unconscious I saw a man on the road ahead of me."

"Well?"

"I think it was the man you met this afternoon."

"That man?" cried the bully, and now he showed a sudden interest.

"Yes, and that is why I want to know his name, and where he comes from."

"You must be mistaken, Snow. That man doesn't belong around here."

"Where is he from?"

"I think he comes from Boston, but I am not sure."

"And his name?"

"Why do you ask these questions? Do you think he had something to do with your being thrown from the horse?"

"No, not with being thrown from the horse, Reff. But, if you'll remember, when I came to my senses my watch was gone, also my stickpin and eight dollars in bills."

"And you think that man took them?" questioned Reff Ritter, in a voice that sounded strained.

"I won't say that until I know more about the man. If you say he is a good, honest man, why then I'll be bound to believe I am mistaken."

"I don't know much about him, but I don't think he is a thief," answered the bully, slowly. "His name is Smith, Cameron Smith, and he is a

commercial traveler. I only met him twice, once about two weeks ago and to-day. He knows my—er—my uncle, and is doing some business for him, and he wanted to see me about it, that's all. But I am sure you are mistaken about his robbing you."

"I didn't say he robbed me,—in fact, I am not positive he was the man I saw on the road."

"I don't think he was near Cedarville at the time. He spends most of his time around Boston. Is that all you want to know? If it is, I'm going to lie down and try to get some sleep," went on Reff Ritter, passing his hand over his forehead.

"Yes, that's all," answered Andy, shortly. "Much obliged." And he left the dormitory.

He was not at all satisfied with the way Reff Ritter had acted. Evidently the bully was much put out over the fact that his meeting with Cameron Smith was known.

"He didn't say much about what business he had with the man," mused Andy. "It all sounds rather fishy to me. Wish I had some way of finding out more about this Cameron Smith. Guess I'll write to some of my friends in Boston and see if they can find out anything about him." And Andy sent a letter the very next morning.

On this same day Pepper had a sharp wrangle

with Josiah Crabtree. The dictatorial teacher accused Pepper of copying an example in algebra from another cadet, and a bitter altercation followed.

"I didn't do it, and I don't want you to say so!" flared up Pepper, his cheeks aflame.

"Ditmore, be silent!" roared Josiah Crabtree. "Not another word, or I'll send you to Captain Putnam!"

"I don't care—I didn't copy!" muttered Pepper. "It's a shame to say I did!"

"You'll stay in after school," commanded Crabtree, majestically.

The accusation, and the fact that he had to stay in when the others were allowed to go out and have their fun, did not suit The Imp at all. While he sat in the classroom all alone, he thought again of something that had come into his mind before.

"I'll do it!" he said firmly. "I'll do it tonight! I'll show him that he can't accuse me for nothing."

Since the fall term at Putnam Hall had opened Josiah Crabtree had been making frequent trips to Ithaca, to a well-known dentist located in that city. Although many of the cadets did not know it, a few, and among them Pepper, were aware that the teacher was having a new set of false teeth made. Now the teeth were finished, and

Josiah Crabtree was wearing them with great satisfaction and not a little pride. He fancied that the new teeth added not a little to his personal appearance.

It was Pepper's plan to get hold of these teeth and hide them. How the trick was to be accomplished he did not yet know, but he resolved to watch his chances.

That evening, as luck would have it, Josiah Crabtree retired early. As was his custom, he placed his false teeth in a glass of water on a stand in his room. Watching through a keyhole, Pepper saw him do this, and then calmly waited for the teacher to go bed and fall asleep.

The door was locked, but The Imp was equal to the emergency. The room next to that occupied by Crabtree was vacant, and he entered this and threw open the window. The window of the teacher's apartment was less than three feet away, and the sash was pulled down a few inches to let in fresh air.

Pepper was not such an acrobat as Andy, but he quickly raised the next window and moved into the teacher's apartment. In a trice he had secured the new set of teeth, and then he retired as quickly as he had come, leaving both windows as he had found them.

"Now what shall I do with the teeth?" the

cadet asked himself. He was strongly tempted to tell Jack and Andy of the trick, but decided to keep the matter to himself.

At last another idea came into The Imp's head and after everybody had apparently gone to bed he stole downstairs and entered the assembly room of the school. He had previously tied the set of teeth to a bit of fishing line having a sinker at the other end. He now took aim at the central chandelier and by good luck sent the sinker and line whirling around one of the pendants, leaving the set of teeth dangling below a foot or more.

"Won't there be a surprise when they see 'em up there!" he muttered. "And won't Crabtree have a job getting them down!"

"Oh, my, what a thing to do!" came a voice from out of the darkness. Pepper whirled around quickly, but the speaker had vanished, banging a door after him.

"Who was that?" was the question Pepper asked himself. He could not place the voice, and was much disturbed. Would the intruder, who had seen his actions, expose him?

"I'll have to chance it," he told himself rather dubiously. "I can't get the teeth down anyway. Too bad! I thought I was alone!" And then he hurried off to bed in anything but a comfortable frame of mind.

CHAPTER XX

PEPPER A PRISONER

At the usual hour the next morning Josiah Crabtree arose and dressed himself. He was in a far from happy frame of mind, for a tailor's bill he had to pay was higher than he thought it ought to be.

Having donned his garments, and washed himself and combed his hair, he turned to the stand to get his new set of teeth.

He took up the glass and peered into it.

"Hum!" he mused. "I thought I put them in there—in fact, I was sure of it!" he murmured.

He set the glass down and commenced to look around, on the bureau, on his bookcase, on the shelf, and even on the chairs. But, of course, nothing in the shape of the set of teeth came to light.

"This is queer, mighty queer," said the teacher to himself. "Now, let me think what I did with

them. Yes, I put them in the glass, I am positive of it!"

He examined the glass once more, turning it around and around. Then he commenced a systematic search of the room. At the conclusion something like a groan escaped his lips.

"They are gone! gone!" he murmured hollowly. "And I left the old set at the dentist's to be made over! Oh, what shall I do? I cannot go to the classroom without my teeth, the cadets would roar at me! It must be a trick, a wicked trick! Oh, if only I could find out who did this awful thing!"

He made another hunt, and then, not knowing what else to do, opened his door and hailed a passing cadet.

"Kindly ask Captain Putnam to step here as soon as he can," he mumbled.

"Yes, sir," answered the cadet, and looked curiously at the teacher. "Got a toothache, Mr. Crabtree?"

"No, I have no toothache," mumbled the teacher. "Send Captain Putnam as soon as you can," and then he dove back into his bedroom.

Several minutes passed and George Strong put in an appearance.

"Dalling said you wanted to see Captain Put-

nam," he said. "The captain has left for Buffalo on business. Can I do anything for you?"

"Mr. Strong, a wicked trick has been played on me!" burst out Josiah Crabtree.

"A trick?"

"Yes. My teeth are gone, the new set I had made! Some cadet has taken them!"

"Can it be possible!" murmured George Strong. "Where did you leave them?"

"In that glass on the stand. Oh, what shall I do? My other set is at the dentist's, getting fixed."

"Maybe I can send for them."

"Hardly, since the dentist is at Ithaca. Oh, what a wretch, to take my teeth! I cannot go to the classroom without my teeth. I would be the laughing-stock of the entire school! It is a dreadful state of affairs!"

"I don't see how I can help you out, sir," answered George Strong, sympathetically.

"I shall have to stay here until something is done. See if you can't find the cadet who took the teeth."

"I will do what I can," answered George Strong, and left the room.

Josiah Crabtree was walking up and down nervously, when there came a timid knock on the door. He opened it to confront Mumps.

"Well, Fenwick, what do you want?" demanded

the teacher, harshly. The sneak of the school generally had some tale of woe to tell, and he was just now in no humor to listen to any such recital.

"Please, Mr. Crabtree, did you lose anything?" asked Mumps, nervously.

"Ha! what is that? Come in! What do you know?" cried Josiah Crabtree, and caught Mumps by the arm.

"I didn't do it—really and truly I didn't!" cried the sneak, in sudden terror. "I—I only found it out by accident."

"About my—er—my teeth?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you know about them, Fenwick? Quick; out with it!"

"Oh, sir, please don't hurt my arm so!"

"Tell me what you know."

"I—I know where your teeth are, sir, I—I saw them put there last night."

"Where are they?"

"Hanging on the chandelier in Classroom Eight."

"And who put them there?" roared the teacher, in amazement.

"Pepper Ditmore, sir. But, oh, sir, please don't say I told on him or he'll hammer the life out of me!" cried Mumps, in alarm.

"How did he get them?"

"I don't know that, sir. I—I went downstairs to—er—to put away a book for another cadet and I saw Pepper Ditmore sneak into Room Eight. I watched him, and he threw a string with the teeth on 'em up over the chandelier. I thought they might be yours, so I came here to find out."

"Did you get the—er—the teeth?"

"Oh, no, sir. They are too high up. You'll have to get a ladder to get them down."

"The rascal!" howled Josiah Crabtree. "Oh, wait till I get my hands on him! But I must get the teeth first." He thought for a moment. "Fenwick, find Snuggers and send him to me at once."

"Yes, sir."

"And don't say a word of this to any one," added the teacher, as the sneak hurried off.

It took Mumps fully five minutes to locate Peleg Snuggers. Wondering what was wanted, the general utility man hurried to the teacher's apartment.

"I want you to get my set of teeth," said Josiah Crabtree. "I am told they are fastened to the chandelier in Room Eight. Get a ladder and get them down immediately. And do it as quietly as you can."

"Yes, sir," answered Snuggers, and left to do the errand. "Teeth on the chandelier!" he murmured. "Wot an idee! Bet some o' the cadets

did thet trick! How funny he did look without his grinders in!"

Pepper had not told any one about his trick, but on a blackboard in the hall he had chalked the words:

Set of Teeth For Sale!
See Chandelier in Room No. 8.
Crabtree, A.M., O.I.C.

This scrawl had attracted the attention of fully a score of cadets, and one after another they entered the classroom designated to find out what it meant. When they saw the teeth dangling in the air they set up a roar.

"Hello, look at the set of teeth!"

"They must belong to old Crabtree!"

"Wonder what he wants for them?"

"I reckon teeth come high, by the look of things!"

The crowd of cadets kept growing larger, until the room was crowded. Then one cadet took a blackboard eraser and threw it at the teeth. This was a signal for a general discharge of all sorts of things at the dangling object.

In the midst of the excitement George Strong came in.

"Boys! boys! Be quiet!" cried the teacher.

"What is the meaning of so much noise?" And then he, too, caught sight of the dangling teeth. "Who placed those there?" he asked.

There was no reply, and he was on the point of sending a cadet for a step-ladder when the door opened and in came Peleg Snuggers with the very thing wanted.

"Mr. Crabtree sent me to git 'em," explained the general utility man.

"Hurrah! Peleg to the rescue!" cried Andy.

"Now, Peleg, do the great balancing act," said Fred Century.

"I will hold the ladder for you, Snuggers," said Mr. Strong. "Boys, stand back," he added, afraid that some of the lads might attempt some joke while the general utility man was in the air.

The step-ladder was placed in position and Snuggers mounted cautiously to the top. He could just reach the chandelier and the teeth, and it took him some time to cut the teeth loose.

"I'll take 'em right to Mr. Crabtree," he said on coming down. "He's in a mighty big hurry for 'em."

"Very well," returned George Strong.

Pepper was watching matters closely and he at once guessed that somebody had told Josiah Crabtree where the teeth were.

"It must have been the fellow who spotted me

last night," reasoned The Imp. "Wonder if he told my name? If he did——" Pepper ended the question with a big sigh.

With great eagerness Josiah Crabtree received the set of teeth and examined them to see if they were all right. Then, having placed them where they belonged, he strode forth from his room in quest of the cadet who had played the trick.

Pepper was just sitting down at the breakfast table when there was a sudden step behind him and the next moment he found himself jerked out of his place.

"You come with me, young man!" stormed Josiah Crabtree. "I have an account to settle with you!"

"What do you want, Mr. Crabtree?" asked The Imp, as meekly as he could.

"You know well enough!" cried the teacher. "Come!" And he led Pepper out of the mess-hall. His grip on the youth's arm was so firm that it hurt not a little.

"Mr. Crabtree, you are hurting my arm."

"I don't care if I am!" snapped the teacher. "You come along!" And he fairly dragged Pepper along the hall.

"Where to?"

"You'll soon see."

"What is wrong?"

THIS WAS A SIGNAL FOR THE DISCHARGE OF ALL SORTS OF THINGS AT THE DANGLING OBJECT.

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"You know well enough, Ditmore. You took my—er—my set of teeth! You have made me the laughing-stock of the whole school! You shall suffer for it!"

"Who says I took the teeth?"

"John Fenwick saw you place them on the chandelier! Oh, you need not deny it."

"Mumps! Well, he always was a sneak!" answered Pepper.

"He is a nice, manly youth."

With a firm grip still on Pepper's arm, the irate teacher led the way to a room looking out on the rear. It was an apartment less than ten feet square, and plainly furnished with two chairs and a couch. In one corner was a stand with a wash-bowl and pitcher of water. The single window was stoutly barred.

"Going to make a prisoner of me?" asked Pepper, as the door was opened and he was thrust into the room.

"You shall stay here for the present," snapped Josiah Crabtree. "When I let you out I think you'll be a sadder and perhaps a wiser boy."

"Am I to have my breakfast?"

"No," answered the teacher.

Then he banged the door shut, locked it, and walked swiftly away.

CHAPTER XXI

A GRAVE ACCUSATION

"Well, I suppose I ought not to complain," mused Pepper, as he sat down on one of the chairs. "A fellow can't have his fun without paying for it. But just wait till I catch Mumps! I'll give him a piece of my mind, and maybe more!"

He got up presently and looked out of the window. He could see but little excepting a stretch of snow. The cell-like room was almost without heat, and he had to clap his hands together, and stamp his feet, to keep warm.

"I think I'd give a dollar for some breakfast," he muttered. "Wonder if I could attract the attention of one of the servants and bribe him to get me something?"

As he walked around the little room his eyes caught some writing on the wall. There were several bits of doggerel, one running as follows:

"I am a prisoner of old Josiah,
I'd feel much better if I had a fire!"

"I can sympathize with that fellow," murmured Pepper, as he slapped his hands across his chest, trying to get up more circulation. Then he walked around the room, reading another doggerel or two. Finally he drew out a lead pencil.

"Guess I'll play Shakespeare myself," he murmured, and after some thought, scribbed down the following:

"And I am jugged
Alone in solitude, and by myself
Alone. I sit and think, and think,
And think again. Old Crabtree,
Base villain that he is, hath put me here!
And why? Ah, thereby hangs a tale, Horatio!
His teeth, the teeth that chew the best of steak
Set on our table—those I found and hid;
And Mumps, the sneak, hath told on me! Alas!
When will my martyrdom end?"

Having finished his attempt at blank verse, Pepper continued to walk around the room. He was hungry and cold, and inside of an hour grew somewhat desperate.

"Crabtree has no right to starve me and allow me to catch cold," he told himself. "I don't believe Captain Putnam will stand for it. I'm going to attract some attention."

He took up one of the chairs and with it commenced to pound on the door. He had been pounding for several minutes when he heard some one on the outside.

"Pepper!" came in a low voice.

"Oh, Jack, is that you?"

"Yes. Stop that noise, or I'll get caught."

"I want to get out. I haven't had any breakfast, and it is as cold as Greenland in here."

"If I had a key I'd let you out, but it isn't in the lock," went on the young major.

"Try some of the other keys, Jack."

"I will," was the reply, and the young major hurried off, to return with several keys from other doors. But not one of them fitted the lock before him.

"Too bad!" he murmured.

"Major Ruddy!" came in the harsh voice of Josiah Crabtree behind him. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to Ditmore," answered Jack, boldly.

"Who gave you permission?"

"Nobody, I came as major of the battalion. When a cadet is placed in the guardhouse the major has a right to go and see him."

"Hum!" growled Josiah Crabtree. He took but little interest in the military side of the school and

consequently did not know all the rules. "Well, I can do the talking here. You are excused."

"Mr. Crabtree, Ditmore tells me that he is very cold, and he has had no breakfast."

"Ha! So he is complaining, eh? Well, I'll attend to him. You may go."

"Are you going to give him his breakfast?"

"Yes—when he deserves it—not before."

"How about keeping him in such a cold room?"

"That is my affair."

"If he gets sick will you take the blame?"

"Major Ruddy, I am not here to be questioned by you!" snapped the dictatorial teacher.

"Pepper belongs to my command and he is my personal friend. I don't think you have any right to starve him and keep him in a cold room in such weather as this. I shall complain to Captain Putname as soon as he gets back, and, in the meantime, complain to Mr. Strong."

"I am in charge while Captain Putnam is away."

"Then, if Pepper takes cold from this, you'll be to blame, and you'll foot the doctor's bill," answered Jack, and walked away.

He spoke so sharply that Josiah Crabtree became worried, and, a little later, Pepper was served with a cup of black coffee and several slices of bread without butter. It was a meager meal, but

it was better than nothing, and The Imp disposed of all there was of it. Then a servant appeared with a couple of blankets used by the cadets when in camp.

"You can wrap yourself in these if you are cold, so Mr. Crabtree says," said the servant. And he went out again, locking the door as before.

"Humph! Must take me for an Indian!" muttered Pepper. Nevertheless, he wrapped the blankets around him and then felt considerably warmer.

The morning passed slowly, and at noon Pepper was given a bowl of soup and several additional slices of unbuttered bread. The soup was hot and good, and he wished there was more of it.

"Mr. Crabtree says that is all you can have," said the waiter who served him.

"Crabbed Crabtree!" muttered Pepper, and said no more.

In the middle of the afternoon, directly after school was over, Josiah Crabtree appeared. This time he was accompanied by George Strong.

"Ditmore, we have come to have a talk with you!" cried Crabtree. "And let me say at the start that I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as they say in court."

"Are you going to try me for my life?" demanded The Imp.

"I am going to try you on a very serious charge," snapped Josiah Crabtree.

"Do not be too hasty, Mr. Crabtree," put in George Strong, mildly.

"Mr. Crabtree, if you want to know about the teeth, let me confess that I took them and hung them up where they were found," said Pepper.

"Ha! so you are willing to confess, eh?"

"I am. I did it for fun—but I suppose you don't see the fun," added Pepper, dryly, so dryly in fact that George Strong had to turn away to hide a sudden smile.

"It was a low, contemptible trick!" returned Josiah Crabtree. "But I must say I do not think it quite as bad as your other doings."

"My other doings?" asked The Imp, somewhat mystified.

"Mr. Crabtree, do not be hasty, I beg of you," put in the under teacher.

"Ditmore, how did you get the teeth?" demanded Josiah Crabtree.

"It was very easy, sir, if you must know. I went into the vacant bedroom next to your room, climbed from one window to the other, and the trick was done."

"Were you alone?"

"Yes, sir, absolutely alone."

"Have you been alone when visiting the other

rooms in this building?" demanded Josiah Crabtree, sharply.

"Mr. Crabtree——" began George Strong, but the head teacher motioned for the assistant to be silent.

"I—I don't understand," stammered Pepper.

"You have shown your expertness in visiting rooms during the night, and without awakening anybody," went on Josiah Crabtree, coldly. "Some time ago other rooms were visited in this building, and various things were taken—some things of great value—things which have not been returned. Now, Ditmore——"

"Mr. Crabtree, stop!" cried Pepper, and his eyes flashed with sudden fire. "I know what is in your mind now! But don't you dare to accuse me! Don't you dare!"

"I want you to tell me the truth."

"I have told you all I know. I took the teeth as a joke, and I put them where they could easily be found."

"And about the other things——" The head teacher paused suggestively.

"I know no more about the other things that have disappeared than you do. Do you think I'd rob myself and my best friends?"

"In a case of this kind a person might rob himself just to throw the public off the scent."

"Do you dare to accuse me of these mysterious thefts?" cried Pepper, hotly.

"I think——"

"Mr. Crabtree, I beg of you to be careful," cried George Strong. "Why not drop this whole matter until Captain Putnam returns? Because Ditmore played a joke on you does not say that he is a—a criminal."

"Thank you for that, Mr. Strong," said the cadet, warmly. "I know I had no right to play that joke—I have no right to play any of my jokes—but I only did it for fun. I think it is—is horrible for Mr. Crabtree to even think that I—that—that——" Pepper could not go on for his emotion choked him.

"Oh, you can't deceive me!" sneered Josiah Crabtree. "I am sure that——"

"Mr. Crabtree, I insist that you drop this matter until Captain Putnam returns," interrupted George Strong.

"You insist?" roared the irate instructor.

"I do, sir."

"Who is in authority here, you or I?"

"You are the head teacher, but I feel bound to protect Captain Putnam's interests during his absence. You have no right to accuse any cadet of a crime unless you have proof against him. Have you any proof against Ditmore?"

"You heard how he acknowledged taking the teeth."

"And he said it was a joke—and I believe it was that and nothing more. There is a wide difference between an innocent joke and a premeditated crime. Take my advice and say no more until you have consulted with Captain Putnam."

"Ha! you are against me—just as the cadets are against me!" stormed Josiah Crabtree. "I know I am right. But we can wait, since you insist." He turned towards Pepper. "I'll corner you yet, you young rascal!" he cried bitterly.

And the the two teachers passed out of the cell-like room, the door was again locked, and Pepper was left a prisoner as before.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERY GOES ON

When nightfall came and Pepper still remained a prisoner, both Jack and Andy commenced to worry about their chum.

"It's a shame to keep him in that cold room," said the young major.

"Wonder if we can get him out on the sly?" returned the acrobatic youth. "I'd be willing to run quite a risk to set him free, so he could sleep in his own bed to-night."

"Let us sneak down after dark and see what we can do," suggested Jack.

Of course the fact that Pepper was a prisoner was known throughout the whole school. Many who had laughed over the teeth affair thought it too bad that The Imp should be locked up in a cold room. But others, including Reff Ritter and Gus Coulter, said it served him right.

"He was too fresh," growled Coulter.

"Let him stay there a week; it will do him good," added Ritter.

"You leave things to old Crabtree," said Dan Baxter. "He knows how to put the screws on a cadet."

"Right you are," came from Ritter.

The one boy who had little to say was Mumps. The sneak was scared almost to death, feeling certain that Pepper would square up with him as soon as liberated. The others did not know how Mumps had acted, or Jack and Andy might have given the sneak a sound thrashing.

The young major and the acrobatic youth talked the affair over, and were joined in the discussion by Bert Field, Dave Kearney, and one or two others. They were on the point of going below, when Fred Century came in.

"Crabtree is certainly going to make sure of keeping Pepper a prisoner," said he.

"How do you know that?" asked Jack, quickly.

"He has placed a guard in front of the door, so nobody can open it."

"A guard?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Two cadets—Crane and Barlow. They are to remain on guard three hours and then some others are to relieve them."

"Then we can't do a thing!" groaned Andy. "We might bribe Crane, but nobody could bribe Barlow. He's a sticker on everything he does."

Jack went below and found that the report about the guard was true. The cadets were on duty, and he was not allowed to even speak to Pepper.

"It's too bad," he said, on returning to the dormitory. "I guess poor Pepper will have to remain where he is."

"We might protest to Mr. Strong?" suggested Bart Conners.

"It wouldn't do any good. Crabtree is in charge during Captain Putnam's absence."

One after another the cadets went to bed. Jack was the last to retire, and it was a long while before he dropped off to sleep. Then he dreamed about Pepper up in the far North, sitting on a cake of ice in a bathing-suit, which showed how much he had the welfare of his chum at heart.

In the morning Josiah Crabtree went below early. He expected Captain Putnam back by noon and wished to be prepared to make a proper report to the head of the school on his arrival.

He had just seated himself at the desk in the office when there came a knock on the door.

"Come in!" he said shortly, thinking it might be a servant. The newcomer was Bart Conners.

"Well, Conners, what is it?" demanded the head teacher.

"I want to report that I was robbed last night," answered the captain of Company B.

"Robbed!" ejaculated Josiah Crabtree. "Did you say robbed?"

"Yes, sir."

"What of? Where? When?" Josiah Crabtree's manner showed his tremendous excitement.

"Of a diamond stickpin. I left it in one of my scarfs last night and this morning it was gone. I've looked all over, but I can't find it."

"How late was it when you retired?"

"About ten o'clock."

"And when did you get up?"

"At the first bell."

"And you noticed it was gone at once?"

"Yes, for I wanted to lock it away in my bureau, as Captain Putnam warned us to do when the others' things were stolen."

"This is strange. Do you suspect anybody?"

At this question Bart Conners shook his head.

"Very well, I will look into the matter immediately after breakfast."

Scarcely had Josiah Crabtree spoken when Dan Baxter appeared at the door.

"I want to tell you something!" he said sourly. "I want somebody locked up."

"Locked up?" queried the startled teacher. "What is wrong?" And as he asked the question Bart Conners looked on with interest.

"I'll tell you!" burst out Dan Baxter. "Last night I went to bed with eleven dollars in my vest-pocket. This morning every cent of the money is gone! I want it back! If I don't get it back Captain Putnam has got to stand the loss, for I won't." And the bully looked more sour than ever.

"You robbed, too!" cried Josiah Crabtree, faintly. "Will it ever stop? What is the school coming to?"

"Have you any idea who took the money, Dan?" asked Bart Conners.

"No. I was dead tired and slept like a dog. But I know I had the eleven dollars when I went to bed, and now it's gone."

"So is my diamond stickpin," and the captain of Company B gave the particulars.

"Humph!" muttered the bully. "I heard of those other robberies, but I didn't think I'd get touched as quick as this. If it keeps on the whole school will be cleaned out."

"Yes, and Captain Putnam will be ruined," added Bart, gravely.

"I will see you two cadets later," said Josiah Crabtree, and shut the office desk with a bang.

He hurried away, leaving Bart and Dan Baxter to console themselves as best they could.

Josiah Crabtree was thinking of Pepper. He had accused The Imp only the day before of these crimes, and here the thefts were continuing while Pepper was a close prisoner.

"Perhaps he got out during the night," he muttered. "I must make sure of it." For, to be fair to the dictatorial teacher, he really thought Pepper might be the guilty party.

He questioned the cadets who had been on guard during the night. One and all declared that Pepper had remained a prisoner all night and was still in the cell-like room. Then he spoke to The Imp himself.

"Did you go out last night?" he asked.

"How could I?" asked Pepper.

"Answer my question, Ditmore."

"No, I didn't go out. I have been here ever since you brought me in yesterday."

Teacher and cadet looked sharply at each other, and there was a silence that could be felt. From one of the guards Pepper had learned how Bart and Dan Baxter had been robbed.

"You know I didn't go out," went on Pepper. "You know that I am not guilty of the crimes that have been committed in this school. As soon

as Captain Putnam returns I want to see him, so he can hear my side of the story."

At these words Josiah Crabtree winced. He felt that Captain Putnam might not agree with him concerning the treatment given to Pepper, and that Pepper might get him into "hot water." Even George Strong had intimated this.

"Ditmore," he said, slowly and mildly, "I—er—I feel that perhaps I have been a bit harsh with you. Your trick upset me very much; such a trick would upset anybody. If I—er—accused you falsely I am sorry for it. Supposing I let you go, and supposing we drop the whole matter?"

"I am willing to drop the matter, providing you will retract what you said about my being connected with these—er—these other things," answered Pepper, slowly.

"Well, I—I must have been mistaken. I didn't say you were guilty, I only said it looked suspicious—the way you prowled around, and the way you got into my room. But if you are willing we'll drop the entire matter, and you can go to your room and get ready for breakfast."

Pepper thought rapidly. He was angry over being accused of the crimes, yet he knew he had gone too far in his joke at Josiah Crabtree's expense.

"All right, sir; we'll drop the matter, Mr. Crab-

tree," he said. "Good-morning," and a moment later he quitted his prison and was on his way to his dormitory.

The cadets had much to talk about that day—the sudden liberation of Pepper, and the losses Bart Conners and Dan Baxter had suffered. At noon Captain Putnam came back, and he had the captain of Company B and Dan Baxter in his office for the best part of an hour. But nothing came of the conference, excepting that the owner of the Hall said he would pay all losses and gave Baxter his eleven dollars on the spot. Then he had a long conference with the new man of all work, who was really a detective in disguise. But that individual was as much in the dark as anybody. He had seen nobody prowling around during the night.

"We must get at the bottom of this affair," said Captain Putnam to George Strong. "If we do not, the school will surely be ruined." He was told about the affair of the teeth, but paid little attention, knowing that Josiah Crabtree could be left to manage his own differences with the students.

Pepper had dropped the matter so far as it concerned Josiah Crabtree, but he did not drop it so far as it concerned Mumps. He watched the sneak that day and the next, and managed at last to catch Mumps at the boathouse.

"Now, I am going to give you the thrashing you deserve!" cried The Imp, and caught the sneak by the collar.

"Lemme go!" shrieked Mumps. "Lemme go, or I'll tell Captain Putnam on you!"

"No, you won't!" answered Pepper. "If you do, I'll promise you another licking at the first chance I get!"

And then and there he boxed the sneak's ears and then threw him down in the snow, washing his face and shoving a lot of the snow down inside the lad's shirt. Mumps yelled like a wild Indian, but Pepper did not let up until he felt that he had given the sneak all he deserved.

"You say a word and I'll give you a double dose the next time!" warned Pepper. And this so scared Mumps he never once opened his mouth about the affair.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN ELECTION OF OFFICERS

"ELECTION of officers to-morrow!"

"As if every cadet at the school didn't know it, Pepper."

"Well, Andy, have you made up your mind how you are going to vote?"

"Sure I have," replied the acrobatic youth. "I am going to vote for Bart Conners for major, since Jack don't want to run again."

"That's the way I am going to vote, too."

"How about the two captains?" asked Joe Nelson.

"Well, I think I'll vote for Dave Kearney for one," answered Pepper. "I am not so sure about the other."

"What's the matter with Harry Blossom?" asked Bert Field. "He seems to be a nice sort."

"He is."

"I understand Reff Ritter wants to be a captain," put in Stuffer.

"Sure, an' he'd be afther wantin' to be major, only he ain't popular enough," came from Emerald.

"Coulter is out for a captaincy, too," said Jack, who had come up during the talk.

"Do you think either of them will be elected?" asked Andy.

"Not if I can prevent it," replied the young major. "Neither of them deserves any office."

"I understand Dan Baxter wants to be major," said Stuffer. "Talk about gall! What has he ever done for the school? Nothing."

"He won't get the office," said Jack.

"Is Bart going to have a walkover?" asked Pepper.

"Hardly. Both Dave Kearney and Harry Blossom will run against him, and so will Bob Grenwood, and they all have their friends."

"Well, let the best fellows win, say I!" cried Andy, and then he ran off, to do some fancy "stunts" in the gymnasium.

The excitement attending the disappearance of Bart Conners's stickpin and Dan Baxter's money had somewhat subsided, and now the cadets could think of nothing but the coming election.

"How many cadets are there to vote?" asked Pepper, as he and Jack walked away to the river to skate.

"Eighty-three."

"Then it will take forty-two votes to elect anybody."

"That's it."

"Well, I hope Bart gets the forty-two votes."

"I have been doing a little figuring, and I think he can count on at least thirty-one votes. But I am not so sure of the other eleven."

The election of officers was made the occasion of a holiday at Putnam Hall. Immediately after breakfast, the battalion was formed and marched around the campus and then to the gymnasium. Here Captain Putnam made a little speech, in which he announced that the balloting for a major would be immediately followed by the balloting for one captain and then the other, and then for the lieutenants.

"It is now nine-thirty," concluded Captain Putnam. "Balloting for a new major will take place promptly at ten o'clock."

"Captain Putnam, may I say a word?" asked Major Jack, saluting with his sword.

"Certainly, Major Ruddy."

"Fellow cadets," began Jack, in a clear, steady voice. "All I wish to say is this: As major of the Putnam Hall Battalion I have enjoyed myself very much, and I trust my successor, whoever he may be, will have as good a time. I understand that some of you want to vote for me again. Let

me say that I am not a candidate, and will not accept the office even if elected. I expect to leave this institution next June, and in the meantime hope to devote my time mostly to my studies. I thank you for your attention."

"Hurrah!" shouted a number of the cadets.

"Three cheers for Major Ruddy!" shouted Pepper, and they were given with a will.

"We'll never get a better major!" called out one enthusiastic cadet.

After that there was a great canvassing for votes. Dan Baxter was unusually active, and Jack and Pepper felt certain that he was trying one of his old tricks, namely, that of buying votes. Some of the poorer cadets had very little spending money, and it was a great temptation to them to have money offered for their ballots. Of course, buying votes was dishonorable, and Baxter had to work on the sly. Ritter also tried to buy votes, but soon found out that very few of the cadets would even listen to him, because of the way he had misled them in the past.

At last came the time to vote, and the ballot-box was placed on a table in charge of two cadets and George Strong, who had consented to act as judge of the election.

"This is for a new major only," announced

George Strong. "You will step up and vote as your names are called."

It took but a few minutes to cast the eighty-three ballots. Then the vote was tabulated, while the boys stood around on the tiptoe of expectation.

"I will read the result," announced Captain Putnam, after receiving a paper from Mr. Strong, and he read as follows:

"Whole number of votes cast, 83.
Necessary to a choice, 42.
Paul Singleton has 4.
Henry Lee has 5.
Harry Blossom has 7.
David Kearney has 9.
Reffton Ritter has 12.
Daniel Baxter has 18.
Bart Conners has 28."

"Nobody is elected," said Pepper, in a disappointed voice.

"Boys, you will have to try it again," said Captain Putnam.

"I beg to withdraw my name from the list of candidates," cried Paul Singleton. "All who voted for me will kindly vote for Bart Conners, who is my choice."

"We must beat Ritter and Baxter!" said Andy, in a low voice.

"That's right!" cried another of the cadets. "But how?"

"Let us try to make up a slate," proposed Jack, who was something of a politician. "Harry Blossom and Dave Kearney might withdraw in favor of Bart Conners if the fellows promised to support them for the two captaincies."

"Let us see if it can be done," returned Pepper, quickly. "Hustle now, for we've got to vote again in fifteen minutes."

They hurried around and interviewed Blossom and Kearney, and about twenty other cadets. As a consequence, the pair named said they would withdraw in favor of Bart Conners if supported for the captaincies later. In the meantime Henry Lee said he would drop out also, since he expected to leave school in June.

Once again the ballots were cast, and now it was easy to see that Bart, Ritter and Baxter were exceedingly anxious. Both Ritter and Baxter did their best to gain the votes dropped by Henry Lee and Paul Singleton.

"I will read the result," said Captain Putnam, a few minutes later. And amid a breathless silence, he read the following:

"Whole number of votes cast, 83.
Necessary to a choice, 42.
Robert Grenwood has 5.
Reffton Ritter has 10.
Daniel Baxter has 12.
Bart Conners has 56."

"Hurrah for Bart Conners!" shouted half a dozen cadets in chorus.

"Bart Conners is declared elected major for the ensuing term," went on Captain Putnam. "Major Conners, allow me to congratulate you," and he came forward and held out his hand.

"And let me congratulate you, too," added Major Jack, and he shook hands also.

A great number of cadets, and some teachers, come up to shake Bart by the hand. Ritter and Baxter were conspicuous by their absence. Each of the bullies was chagrined at the poor showing he had made. Instead of gaining on the second ballot they had lost.

"That shows how much one can depend on his friends," growled Baxter to Mumps.

"Never mind, Dan, maybe you'll be elected a captain," answered the toady and sneak.

"I don't want to be a captain; I want to be a major or nothing," grumbled the bully.

A little later the balloting for a captain for

Company A was started. There were half a dozen candidates, including both Ritter and Coulter, and Ritter did all he could to get the boys who had voted for Baxter to support him, and then bribed Coulter to step out in his favor. But Jack, Pepper and Bart Conners worked hard for Harry Blossom, as agreed, and as a consequence Harry was elected on the third ballot by fifty-two votes.

"Hurrah for Harry Blossom!" was the cry, and the newly-elected captain of Company A was congratulated on all sides.

This election was followed by that for a captain for Company B. Here the struggle was as fierce as before, but Dave Kearney won out on the sixth ballot. Then came ballots for the lieutenants, and Bob Grenwood came out strong with fifty-five votes. Dale Blackmore was made the new quartermaster, much to his delight, although Dale cared more for athletics than he did for military matters.

Not one of the Ritter or the Baxter crowd got an office, much to their disgust. Baxter went off by himself to sulk, but Ritter and Coulter denounced their rivals openly.

"I reckon votes were bought," said Ritter.

"Sure they were bought," responded Coulter.

"So they were, by Ritter & Company," retorted Andy, who overheard the talk.

"Oh, give us a rest, Snow!" muttered Ritter. "I

don't want the old office anyway, and all my real friends know it."

"Sour grapes," answered the acrobatic youth.

"Don't you get fresh, or I'll punch your head!" cried the bully, savagely.

"Will you?" answered Andy. "Just you try it, if you dare!"

"I will!" came hotly from Ritter, and leaping forward he hit Andy a sharp blow on the chin.

The assault came so suddenly that the acrobatic youth had no time to defend himself. He staggered and fell, and as he went down the bully gave him a sharp kick in the side.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANDY SHOWS HIS COURAGE

"Stop that, Ritter! What do you mean by kicking Andy when he is down?"

It was Pepper who uttered these words, as he rushed up from the other side of the campus.

"I didn't kick him," retorted Ritter. He was startled, for he had not anticipated being seen.

"You did!"

"A fight! A fight!" was the cry, and soon a crowd of cadets began to collect.

Slowly Andy arose to his feet. His face was pale, for both the blow on the chin and the kick in the side had been severe.

"You—you brute!" he gasped. "You dirty brute!"

"Hi, don't you call me a brute!" roared Ritter.

"You are a brute!" put in Pepper. "No fair-minded chap would kick a fellow when he was down."

"Ditmore, you keep out of this," grumbled the bully.

"I'm going to see that Andy has fair play," returned Pepper.

The encounter had occurred after Captain Putnam and the teachers had disappeared, so there was little chance of an interruption by the Hall authorities.

Andy stood up and tried to collect himself. He was "boiling mad," for the attack had been a dastardly one.

"Had enough?" demanded the bully, coming closer, and with his fists clenched.

"No, I haven't!" answered the acrobatic youth, and then, of a sudden, he sprang high in the air, to come down on Ritter's shoulder. Then he caught the bully around the neck with one arm.

"Hi! hi! let up——" began Ritter. "I—I——"

"I'll not let up!" retorted Andy. "You brought this on yourself, Reff Ritter, and now you can take the consequences. How do you like that, and that, and that?"

Each "that" was accompanied by a stinging blow, one on the ear, one on the eye and one on the nose. The second made the bully's left optic black, and the third caused the blood to spurt freely. Then Andy landed another blow on

Ritter's mouth, leaped to the ground, and shoved the fellow from him.

"I'll give you those for an opener," he said, breathing heavily. "You can have some more in another minute."

"You—you rat!" hissed the bully and came at Andy with a rush. But the acrobatic youth dodged, and Ritter ran full tilt into Dan Baxter.

"Hi, keep your distance, Ritter!" growled Baxter.

"I'll fix him!" yelled Ritter, and made another lunge for Andy. This time he hit Andy on the shoulder. But the acrobatic youth came back at him in double-quick order, and Ritter received a blow in the chin that bowled him over into the arms of Nick Paxton. As he went over his eyes closed, and then he slid in a heap to the ground.

"A knockout for Snow!"

"Say, that was a smashing blow!"

"It served Ritter right; he kicked Andy when he was down."

"Yes, and he hit him before he was ready."

Paxton, Coulter and several others gathered around the fallen bully and rubbed his face with some snow. In a few minutes he opened his eyes and stared around.

"Don't—don't hit me again!" he mumbled, between his bleeding teeth.

"Have you had enough?" demanded Andy. "If you haven't, stand up and get some more."

"Don't—don't hit me again!"

"Then you have had enough?"

"I'll—I'll meet you another time."

"No, you won't, Ritter, you'll meet me now."

"That's the talk!" cried several. "Finish the fight."

"I don't want to fight any more," answered the bully, and his words came in almost a whine.

"Then you have had enough? Yes or no?"

"I've—I've had enough," said Ritter, in a low tone.

"Very well; see that you remember this lesson," declared Andy, and then turned on his heel and walked towards the Hall, followed by a dozen of his admirers.

"Andy, it was great, the way you jumped on him!" declared Pepper.

"It was only a little acrobatic stunt," declared Andy. "But it came in mighty handy. I shouldn't have tried it only he didn't fight fair—hitting me before I was ready, and kicking me when I was down."

"You watch out that he doesn't play you foul," said Dale, who was present.

"I'll keep my eyes open."

It was soon whispered around the school how

Andy had met and vanquished the bully, and as a consequence many of the fellows who had toadied to Ritter deserted him. Even Paxton gave him the cold shoulder openly, and Baxter simply sneered at him. Only Gus Coulter clung to Ritter, and the pair seemed to become greater cronies than ever.

After the election of officers, and the fight, matters ran along swiftly until the midwinter holidays. During those days many of the boys visited their homes. Captain Putnam spent his time in trying to clear up the mystery surrounding the disappearance of the things from the Hall, but without success. The detective he had hired unearthed nothing of importance and was discharged. One of the waiters left of his own accord, and the master of the school could not help but wonder if he was the guilty party.

In the meantime, Andy and his chums had been trying to find out something about Cameron Smith. They were equally unsuccessful, for no one they knew in Boston had ever heard of that individual. His name was not in the directory.

"There was something strange about him," said Andy. "I wish Ritter would tell us more about him. But I know it would be useless to ask Reff. He hasn't spoken to me since the fight."

After the holidays came some fine skating on the lake, and also some iceboating.

Fred Century had had a new iceboat built at Cedarville. It was called the *Skimmer,* and he was exceedingly proud of the craft.

"You must come out with me," he said to Jack, Pepper and Andy, one Saturday afternoon. "The ice is as smooth as glass, and the wind is just right."

"All right!" cried Pepper. "A sail will suit me down to the ground."

Jack and Andy were also pleased to go, and the quartet of boys were soon down at the boathouse, where the *Skimmer* was tied up.

They were just getting aboard of the iceboat when they saw another craft heave in sight.

"Who is that on board?" asked Andy.

"It is Reff Ritter," answered Pepper, "and Gus Coulter is with him."

"The iceboat belongs to a fellow in Cedarville," said a cadet standing near. "Ritter hired it for a week."

The second craft was called the *Rosebud,* and was rather a fine-looking outfit, with steel runners and a snowy-white sail.

"He must have paid something to rent that," observed Jack. "I thought he didn't have much money?"

"He says his father is in business again and is doing better," answered Paxton, who was present. "Hello, Reff!" he called out. "Want another passenger?"

"I don't want you!" answered the bully, briefly.

"All right, you don't have to have me!" growled Paxton.

"Say, Century, do you want to race me?" asked Ritter, as he brought the *Rosebud* alongside the dock.

"I don't know," answered Fred, slowly. "What do you say?" he whispered to the others.

"Do you think you can beat him?" asked Pepper.

"I can try."

"Then go ahead," said Jack. "You don't care, do you, Andy?"

"Not at all—if Fred can beat him," was the reply from the acrobatic youth.

"All right, I'll race!" called out Fred. "But you will have to carry four, the same as myself."

"Humph!" growled Ritter. "I don't know about that."

"I'll go, Reff!" cried Mumps.

"So will I!" added a cadet named White.

"All right, jump aboard," cried the bully, and Mumps and White lost no time in doing as bidden.

"Where do you want to race to?" asked Fred.

"Up to Dorsett's Point and back."

"All right. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then let her go!" yelled the owner of the *Skimmer;* and in a moment the iceboat race had started.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MAN AT POINT VIEW LODGE

At first it was an even race. Reff Ritter knew how to handle an iceboat to perfection and brought his craft up in the breeze in a manner that won considerable admiration.

"Take care that he doesn't beat you, Fred," said Pepper. "If he does, he will never get done crowing over you."

"This race isn't over yet," answered the owner of the *Skimmer*. "Wait till we round the bend yonder."

When the bend mentioned was gained the *Rosebud* was a good three lengths in the lead.

"Good-by!" shouted Coulter. "Here is where we leave you behind!"

"Your iceboat isn't in it with this," added Mumps.

"We'll tell them you are coming by-and-by!" came from Ritter.

"Don't answer them," whispered Jack. "Fred, can we do anything to help the boat along?"

"Just shift a little more to the left—that's it," was the reply. "Now we'll soon get the breeze and then we'll do better."

Fred's words proved true. As the *Skimmer* rounded the bend, a good, stiff blast struck her sails and away she started after the *Rosebud.*

"Now we are going some!" cried Andy, his face brightening.

"Make her hum!" cried Pepper.

Slowly but surely the *Skimmer* crept up on the *Rosebud,* until the bow of the second craft overlapped the stern of the first.

"Not walking away so fast now, are you?" questioned Pepper, cheerily.

"Just wait, we'll beat you, see if we don't!" growled Coulter.

"Swing the mainsail over!" cried Ritter.

His order was obeyed, and the *Rosebud* commenced to pick up again. But the *Skimmer* kept on steadily, and at last, when the turning-point was reached, was several lengths ahead.

"Now for the homestretch!" cried Jack.

"I hope we win by about a mile!" was Andy's wish.

The turning-point was a well-known rock, and the *Skimmer* came around this in fine style. But,

just as this was accomplished, Ritter allowed the *Rosebud* to swing around out of the proper course.

"Look out, you'll run us down!" yelled Fred, in alarm.

"Clear the track!" yelled Ritter, angrily. "Clear the track!"

"The clown!" muttered Jack. "Does he want to run into us?"

Fred worked quickly, assisted by all the others and the *Skimmer* was thrown out of her course. On rushed both of the iceboats and the *Rosebud* slid by the other with less than six inches to spare.

"Ritter, that wasn't fair!" shouted Fred. "I won't race with a fellow who won't sail fair!"

"You go to grass! I don't care about the race anyway!" howled the bully.

"You are beaten and you know it," cried Pepper.

"In a regular race such actions would disqualify you," was Jack's comment.

"Oh, don't preach! I know what I am doing!" grumbled Ritter, and then he steered off in another direction and out of hearing.

"What a mean bully he is getting to be!" said Fred. "It seems to me he is much worse than he was when I first came to the Hall."

He is slowly but surely losing his grip here and that is souring him," answered Jack. "Before he knows it he won't have a friend in the world. As

it is, about the only fellow who is really friendly with him is Coulter. Paxton doesn't have much to do with him, and Mumps merely toadies to him the same as he toadies to Dan Baxter and some of the rest."

"Where shall we go now?" asked Fred.

"Anywhere you please," came from the others.

"Shall we take a run up to Point View?" and Fred looked quizzically at first one and then another of his friends.

"Might do that," answered Jack. "But the Lodge is shut up, you know; the Fords are at their city home for the winter."

"Well, we can run up that way anyway," said Pepper. "One place is as good as another."

The course of the iceboat was slightly changed, and in less than a quarter of an hour they swept up to the dock attached to Point View Lodge. The sails were lowered and they went ashore to stretch their legs, for sitting on the iceboat rather cramped them.

"Might as well take a look around the Lodge while we are here," suggested Jack.

"Is there a caretaker here?" asked Andy.

"I don't think so, but there may be."

The four youths walked through the snow in the direction of the mansion, which was set among some heavy trees.

"Hello, what is that, an animal track?" asked Jack, pointing to a trail among the trees.

"Looks more like human footprints to me," replied Pepper.

"Then somebody must be here."

"Funny the trail leads from the side fence," came from Andy. "If it was some person who belonged here why wouldn't he come from the road or the dock?"

"Maybe it was easier to come that way than by the road, right after the snow fell," suggested Pepper.

They walked forward to the mansion and saw that the trail led to the back door and then around to a side window.

"Hello! I don't like this!" exclaimed Jack. "What would a person be doing at the side window?"

"Try the window?" suggested Fred. They had already tried the door, to find it locked.

Jack stood on a flat rock that was handy and took hold of the lower sash. Much to his surprise it went up with ease.

"It's open!" he exclaimed. "Do you know what I think? I think somebody came here and got into the house by this window!"

"A tramp, perhaps," said Fred.

"Or a burglar!" vouchsafed Andy.

"Do you think he is in the house now?" asked Pepper.

"That is something for us to find out. If he is, we must catch him and turn him over to the authorities!"

"Have we a right to enter the house?" questioned Andy.

"I am sure Mr. Ford would want us to do so, Andy."

"I guess you are right. But be careful, Jack, that fellow, whoever he is, may be a desperate character."

"Perhaps he isn't here now," said Fred. "He may have looted the place and skipped."

"I'll soon see," cried Jack. "Pepper, do you want to go in with me? You other fellows might stay on guard."

"Sure, I'll go in," answered The Imp.

In a moment more the two cadets stood in the sitting-room of the mansion.

"Better not make too much noise," whispered Jack. "If he is here we may be able to take him unawares."

As the sky was overcast that afternoon it was rather dark in the mansion, and the cadets could see but little as they made their way from one room to another. They were just entering the

dining-room when Pepper's foot struck something and sent it spinning across the floor.

"What's that?" asked his chum.

"I don't know—sounded like a spoon or a fork," was the reply. Pepper walked forward, bent down, and felt around. "Yes, it's a silver fork!"

"It made as much noise as if it was a dozen of 'em!" murmured his chum.

"Hark!"

Pepper put up his hand and both listened intently. They had heard a noise, as of footsteps overhead.

"Somebody is up there!" whispered Jack.

"It must be the fellow we are after!" returned Pepper. "What shall we do next, go after him?"

"Yes, but we had better try to arm ourselves."

"I've got the fork."

"I'll take this," said Jack, picking up a bronze ornament from the mantelpiece.

Hardly daring to breathe, the two cadets stole from the dining-room to the hall and prepared to mount the stairs. As they did this they heard more footsteps, this time in the rear of the upper floor of the mansion.

"There he goes, Jack!"

"Sounds as if he was going to try to get out the back way!"

"Hi, there, stop!" called Pepper, at the top of his voice. "Stop, you rascal!"

"Don't you try to stop me!" was the reply from the upper hallway. "If you do, it will be the worse for you!"

"Who is he?" asked Pepper, quickly. "I've heard that voice before."

"I think I know," answered his chum. "Come on, and we'll soon see if I am right."

CHAPTER XXVI

WHAT THE CONSTABLE THOUGHT

Up the stairs went the two cadets, Jack leading the way. On the upper landing they paused, for the sounds of footsteps had suddenly ceased.

"Which way did he go?" whispered Pepper.

"I don't know, Pepper. Go slow now, we don't want to walk into any trap."

With caution the chums made their way to the back end of the hall. As they did this a door close by came open and a cold draught of air met the lads.

"This way!" cried Jack. "He has opened a window! That air comes from outside!"

He rushed through the open door, to find himself in a bedroom. In an alcove was a window and this was wide open. Beyond the window was the top of a back porch, with a trellis reaching to the ground.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Jack, pointing down among the trees.

"Stop! stop!" came in a cry from the side of the mansion, and a moment later Andy appeared, followed by Fred.

"Stop the rascal!" shouted Jack, and bounced out on the porch with all speed. Down the trellis he came, with Pepper following.

By this time the fleeing individual had gained the shelter of a number of trees. Beyond these was a hedge, and he dove through this and then into some brushwood that lined the highway.

"Can you catch him, Andy?" asked Jack.

"I can try!" was the answer.

"Keep back, unless you want to get shot!" roared the man, and he raised something he held in his hand. It was too dark to see if it was a pistol.

Andy came to a halt, and in a few moments his companions joined him. By this time the fellow was out of sight. The cadets strained their ears, but in the snow no sounds of footsteps reached them.

"I guess we have lost him," murmured Fred.

"Sorry I didn't keep after him," grumbled Andy.

"He might have shot you.'

"Come on, let us make a hunt for him!" cried Jack, and this was done. But though they searched

the vicinity for the best part of half an hour they failed to locate the man who had fled.

"Jack, who do you think it was?" questioned Pepper, as the four boys gathered in the mansion and lit one of the lamps, for it was now quite dark.

"I may be mistaken, but to me his voice sounded like that of the man Reff Ritter met in Cedarville, Cameron Smith."

"Just what I think!" cried The Imp. "Did you get a look at his face?"

"Not a close look, and it was too dark to see much. But that Smith had a queer catch in his voice and this fellow had the same thing."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Was that the fellow Reff met?" demanded Andy.

"We are not sure, Andy, but we think so."

"What was he doing here?" asked Fred.

"That remains for us to find out," answered Pepper. "Certainly the man had no right here, otherwise he wouldn't have run away as he did."

"Let us take a look through the house," suggested Pepper.

A hand-lamp was lit and the boys began a systematic inspection of the Lodge. They found nothing disturbed in most of the rooms, but when they inspected the library all set up a shout.

"The safe!"

"It has been blown open!"

"Yes, and look, the contents are scattered all over the floor!"

It was true, the small safe that was located under a bend of the stairs had been drilled and the door blown asunder. On the floor of the library lay the shattered door and likewise several bundles of papers and legal-looking documents. They also saw a case that had contained silverware.

"Wonder how much he took?" said Pepper.

"He took something, that is sure," answered Jack.

"We must have come in right after he blew the safe open," said Andy.

"Boys, I think we ought to notify the authorities at once, and also notify the Fords," cried Jack. "This is a serious piece of business."

"Let us go to the nearest farmhouse and tell the folks," suggested Andy.

He hardly uttered the words when a loud ring at the front door of the mansion made every cadet jump.

"There is somebody now!" cried Fred.

"I'll see who it is," said Pepper, and went off, followed by Jack.

When they opened the door they found themselves confronted by a farmer named Fasick, who lived in that vicinity.

"Hello!" cried the farmer, on noticing the uniforms the boys wore. "What are you cadets doing here?"

"Who are you?" questioned Jack.

"I'm Isaac Fasick, and I own the farm down the road a spell. I saw the lights here, and as Mr. Ford asked me to keep an eye on his property I made up my mind I'd come over and see what it meant. Is he here on a visit?"

"Not that we know of, Mr. Fasick," answered Jack. "Come in out of the cold, and we'll tell you something."

The burly farmer entered, and the cadets quickly related what had occurred. When Mr. Fasick saw the shattered safe he was all but stunned.

"The pesky rascal!" he ejaculated. "Did he run away with much?"

"That we don't know, for we have no idea what was in the safe," replied Jack.

"He must have taken some of the silver spoons, and knives and forks," put in Pepper. "Here is the empty silverware case, and I found a loose silver fork on the floor of the dining-room."

"The Fords will be the only ones to tell just what was taken," said Andy. "And the sooner we notify them the better."

"I don't know if they are in the city or not,"

said Isaac Fasick. "I know they meant to travel some this winter."

"They are at their city home just now; I got a letter day before yesterday," answered the former major of the school battalion. He did not deem it necessary to say the letter was from Laura Ford.

"Let us telegraph to them," said Pepper. "But what about the thief? We ought to get right after him."

"We can tell Jed Plodders," said the farmer. "He's the Cedarville constable and pretty smart, too."

"Jed will never catch that fellow," answered Jack. "He'll be miles and miles away before the constable gets his badge pinned on to go after him."

"Oh, Jed is smart," cried the farmer. "He's my wife's second cousin, and the whole family is mighty cute."

"All right, let him catch the thief," answered Pepper.

Matters were talked over for several minutes, and the boys decided to separate, Andy and Pepper to remain on guard at the Lodge and Fred and Jack to run the iceboat to Cedarville and take Isaac Fasick along.

"Now, don't you run into no air-holes!" cried the farmer, as he took a seat on the *Skimmer*. "I don't want to drown just yet, not me!"

"We'll be on our guard," answered the owner of the craft.

"The wind is just right," said Jack, as the mainsail was hoisted. This was true, and the run to the village took but a few minutes. While the boys went off to send their message to the Fords, Isaac Fasick hunted up the constable and related what had occurred.

"Ha! a robbery, eh?" cried the constable, looking highly important.

"That's it, Jed."

"And you caught the boys in the house all alone?" went on the constable, trying to look very wise.

"Why, yes; I did."

"Maybe they did the robbery, Isaac."

"By gum! I didn't think of that, Jed!" exclaimed the farmer.

"It would be an easy way of tryin' to look innercent," went on the constable. "They fixed it all up—blow open the safe, hide the silver an' other valerables, an' then, when you surprise 'em, they try to put the crime off on sumbuddy else."

"Say, Jed, do you think that's so?" asked the farmer, his suspicions aroused.

"Don't it look reasonable, Isaac?"

"It sure does, Jed. But to think them boys would do sech a terruble deed!"

"Some o' them boys at boardin'-school spend a fierce sight o' money. Some of 'em drink an' gamble. They ain't above gittin' money by hook or crook, ef they need it. Yes, they may be guilty," and the constable swelled out with his own importance.

"Perhaps you better question 'em," suggested the farmer, timidly.

"Question 'em?" snorted the constable. "Yes, I will; an' I'll do more—I'll hold 'em until this mysterious case is cleared up!"

CHAPTER XXVII

LOOKING FOR CLUES

HAVING sent their message to the Fords, the two cadets turned in the direction where the farmer had said the constable lived.

"I don't think old Plodders will be able to do a thing," said Jack. "He'll look wise and ask a lot of questions, and that's all."

A block had been covered when they saw the farmer and the constable approaching. On his breast Jed Plodders had pinned a bright, silver star, and he carried a policeman's club in his hand.

"There they are!" cried Isaac Fasick.

"Is them the cadets?" queried the guardian of the peace.

"That's two of 'em. The other two said they'd stay an' watch the house."

"Stop!" cried the constable, and pointed his club at the cadets.

"Are you Constable Plodders?" questioned Jack.

"That's who I be," was the stern reply. "Now

then, out with it, young fellers. You broke into Mr. Ford's house, didn't you? Now, don't try to fool me, fer it won't wash! You broke into the house, and Mr. Fasick ketched you at it, didn't he?" And the constable cast what was meant for an eagle eye on Jack and then on Fred. He had made up his mind that he would surprise both of the boys into a confession.

The two cadets stared in wonder at the constable, and then a smile came into Jack's face. The situation was so ludicrous he felt like laughing. Jed Plodders saw the smile and frowned deeply.

"This ain't no laughing matter, you scamp!" he bellowed. "You broke into the Ford house an' tried to steal the silverware! Now don't try to deny it, or it will be the wuss fer you! You done it now, didn't you?" And he pointed his club at first one cadet and then the other.

"No, we didn't do it!" burst out Fred. "You are a great big chump to think we did!"

"Hi! hi! don't you talk to me like that!" roared the guardian of the peace.

"Then don't you accuse us of any crime," came quickly from Jack.

"Didn't Mr. Fasick find you at the house?" demanded the constable.

"He did, but we didn't go there to steal; we

went there to see if everything was all right. He went there for the same purpose."

"Say, don't you go for to mix me up in this robbery," interrupted Isaac Fasick, hastily. "I didn't have a thing to do with it."

"No more had we," answered Fred. "We just sailed to the place on my iceboat. We can prove it."

"We are friends of the Ford family; we can easily prove that, too," added Jack. "Mr. Ford and his wife both asked us, when we were in this vicinity, to take a look and see if everything was all right. We found a strange man in the mansion and we did our best to catch him, but he got away. What we want you to do is to get busy and try to catch that rascal. If you don't do it, we'll make a complaint against you for neglect of duty."

While Jack had been major of the school battalion he had been in the habit of speaking in an authoritative voice, and now he used the same tone in addressing Jed Plodders. The constable stared at the cadet for a moment and then his jaw dropped and likewise the club in his hand.

"Well—er—if you're friends o' the family mebbe that alters the—er—the case," he stammered. "Why didn't you say so fust?"

"You didn't give us a chance," answered Fred.

"What you want to do is to go to the house and

then try to get on the track of that robber," said Jack. "We'll help you all we can."

"I got to send word to Mr. Ford."

"We have already done that, and he will probably come as quickly as he can, or send somebody."

"Did you git a good look at the man?"

"No, not a very good look."

"Then you hain't got no idee who he might be?" went on the constable.

"Well, I think——" commenced Jack, and then broke off short, and at the same time pinched Fred's arm. It would do little or no good to acquaint the constable with their suspicion that the rascal might be the man named Cameron Smith.

"What do you think?" demanded Jed Plodders.

"I think I saw the man in Cedarville once. But I am not certain. I rather imagine he was a stranger around here."

"Thet's what he was," came from Isaac Fasick. "There hain't no thieves livin' in these parts. We are all honest folks."

Several other men of Cedarville were told about the robbery, and a crowd of half a dozen got on the iceboat and sailed to Point View Lodge. When they arrived at the house they found that Pepper and Andy had brought in some wood and started

a cheerful blaze in the big fireplace of the living-room.

"It was so cold we couldn't stand it," said Pepper. "I don't think Mr. Ford will mind."

The constable and the other newcomers inspected the damage done to the safe with interest, and walked through the rooms of the house. The cadets showed them just how the thief had made his escape, and Jed Plodders and two of the men went off to see if they could trail the evil-doer.

"I think at least one of us ought to stay here until Mr. Ford comes," said Pepper.

"Supposing you and I stay?" suggested Andy. "Fred and Jack can take the iceboat back to the Hall and explain matters to Captain Putnam."

This was agreed to, and a little later the *Skimmer* was on the way to the school. It was now after eight o'clock and the cadets were hungry. Andy and Pepper were to have their meals sent to them from the Fasick farmhouse.

Tying up at the boathouse landing, Jack and Fred hurried into the Hall. As they passed one of the classrooms they came face to face with Reff Ritter.

"Got back late, didn't you?" said the bully to Fred.

"Yes," was the short reply.

The bully passed on without another word.

Jack was in a quandary. What should he tell Captain Putnam? If he told of his suspicions concerning Cameron Smith he would drag Reff Ritter into the mix-up.

"I guess I had better wait until something more turns up," he thought. "If I mention this Smith, and he is innocent, both he and Reff will be terribly angry at me."

As briefly as possible the former major of the school battalion related what had occurred at Point View Lodge. Captain Putnam listened with keen interest.

"It is a pity you didn't catch that robber," said he. "For all we know, he may be the fellow who has been stealing here."

"Well, we couldn't get him," answered Jack. "Maybe Constable Plodders will be more successful."

"I hardly think so, Ruddy. So you left Snow and Ditmore at the Lodge?"

"Yes, sir. We thought Mr. Ford would like them to remain until he got there, or sent somebody."

"I see." Captain Putnam mused for a moment. "I don't see that I can do anything. You had better go and get your supper. Tell the head waiter I sent you in."

"Yes, sir," said Jack, and he and Fred hurried

off to the mess-hall. The waiter was inclined to grumble a little at having to serve them at such a late hour, but, nevertheless, he got them plenty to eat, and they pitched in as only hungry boys can.

On the following morning came word from Cedarville that Mr. Ford had arrived, and Jack and Fred were allowed to take the *Skimmer* and sail to Point View Lodge. There they met the gentleman, who was somewhat excited over what had occurred.

"The loss of the silverware is a serious one," said he. "The ware came from my wife's grandfather and she prized it very highly. I meant to take it to the city with me, but forgot to ship it, and so we placed it in the safe here. A couple of gold napkin-rings are also gone, and likewise my old gold watch."

"Mr. Ford, I wish to tell you something in private," said Jack, and then he took the gentleman aside and related his suspicions concerning Cameron Smith.

"I think this is assuredly worth looking into, Jack," said Rossmore Ford, slowly. "I shall put a first-class city detective on this case, and I'll tell him about this Cameron Smith. He'll soon he able to find out who the chap is. If he is an honest man, well and good. But if not, we'll

round him up and make him give an account of himself."

"Please don't mention our names," said Jack, gravely. "And please don't mention Reff Ritter."

"I'll remember that," answered the owner of the Lodge.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TO THE RESCUE

"If this weather keeps on, skating and ice-boating will soon be over, Jack."

"Right you are, Pepper. I think if we want any more skating this season we had better go out this afternoon."

"Just what I say!" cried Dale Blackmore. "If it starts to rain the ice will be gone in no time."

"All out for a skate, as soon as school is dismissed!" came from Andy.

A week had passed, and during that time nothing had been learned concerning the robbery at Point View Lodge. Mr. Ford had hired two city detectives but, so far, neither these men, nor the local constable, had been able to accomplish anything. One city detective was trying to locate Cameron Smith, but that individual could not be traced.

During the past few days the weather had moderated greatly. Much of the snow was gone,

and the cadets feared that soon the ice on the lake would disappear and then skating would be a thing of the past.

"Spring will be here before you know it," said Pepper.

"Yes, and then summer, and the end of our days at Putnam Hall," added Jack, with something of a sigh.

"Jack, how are you getting along in your studies?" questioned Andy.

"Fairly well. I find Latin rather hard. How about you, Andy?"

"Mathematics is my bugbear, Jack. Some of those problems old Crabtree gives us are corkers."

"Well, you must be sure to pass, Andy, and then it will be good-by to Crabtree forever."

After school was dismissed about twenty of the cadets hurried down to the lake-front to go skating.

"I see Reff Ritter has hired the *Rosebud* again," remarked Pepper, as he was adjusting his skates. "Fred, are you going to take out the *Skimmer?*"

"No, I don't think it is safe. Skating is one thing; to sail a heavy iceboat is another."

"Just my idea," added Stuffer.

They watched Reff Ritter sail away. The only person with the bully was Gus Coulter. Jack and Pepper watched Ritter closely and then looked

questioningly at each other. What did Ritter know about Cameron Smith, and was the man really the fellow who had robbed the Ford mansion?

Soon the merry shouts of the cadets proved they were enjoying themselves thoroughly. Some started a race, while others formed sides for a hockey contest, with Dale Blackmore as captain of one five and Emerald Hogan as captain of the other.

"Let us go down the shore a bit," suggested Jack to Pepper and Andy, and the three joined hands for the spin. All felt like "letting out," as Andy expressed it, and they covered over a mile almost before they knew it.

"The ice is getting pretty rotten," said Jack, as his skate cut in so deeply that he would have fallen had not his chums supported him.

"Yes, a day or two more and skating will be at an end," answered Andy.

"Jack, are you going in for baseball this spring?" questioned Pepper.

"No, I am going in for nothing but study towards the end of the term."

"Well, I guess I'll have to do the same—if I want to graduate," answered Pepper, and he heaved a deep sigh as he thought of all the fun he would have to miss.

The three cadets skated on until they came to a spot where the shore made a sharp turn. On the point of land were a number of trees and bushes, so they could not see what was beyond.

"Listen!" cried Andy. "Somebody is calling!"

"Help! help!" came the cry. "Help!"

"Somebody must have broken in!" exclaimed Jack. "Come on, maybe we can save him!"

He broke away and led around the point of land. Beyond were some rocks and a sort of cove, where the ice was extra soft.

"There is an iceboat!" exclaimed Andy. "It's the *Rosebud!*"

"It's in the water!" ejaculated Pepper. "And see, Gus Coulter is clinging to it."

"Where is Ritter?"

"I don't know."

"I see Ritter!" burst out Jack. "He is clinging to the ice yonder, trying to crawl out! Come on, fellows, we've got to help them both."

"Help! help!" screamed Gus Coulter, and his voice showed that he was almost scared to death. Ritter did not call, but was making frantic efforts to get on top of the ice, which seemed to break away as he placed his weight on it.

It took Jack, Pepper and Andy but a minute to get to the vicinity of the mishap. As he skated

"CATCH HOLD!" JACK CRIED, AS HE SWUNG ONE END OF THE SWEATER TOWARD THE UNFORTUNATE YOUTH.

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forward, the former major of the school battalion stripped off the sweater he was wearing.

"Join hands with me," he called to his chums. "Now be careful; not too near the hole, remember. I'll throw Ritter the end of the sweater."

His chums understood, and while they held hands, Jack advanced cautiously. The ice cracked ominously, but step by step he drew closer to where Ritter was clinging.

"Catch hold!" he cried, as he swung one end of the sweater toward the unfortunate youth.

"You—you won't let go?" questioned the bully, suspiciously.

"Of course not!" retorted Jack. "Hold tight now, and we'll haul you up."

He gave the signal, and Andy and Pepper pulled back with all their might, and Jack did the same. Slowly but surely Reff Ritter came up out of the icy water, his teeth chattering loudly. Soon he was out of danger.

"Run for the nearest farmhouse!" cried Jack. "Put the sweater on if you want to," and he tossed the garment over.

"It was Coulter's fault," growled Reff Ritter. "He swung the sail the wrong way." And then he ran off as advised.

"Such meanness!" snorted Pepper. "And Coulter may be drowned!"

"Ritter was always willing to lay the blame on somebody else," added Andy.

The chums skated as closely as possible to where the iceboat was drifting in a sheet of open water—a spot where some days before a farmer had been cutting ice. To the craft Coulter was clinging and still crying piteously.

"Help!" came in a chattering tone. "Please help me, somebody, or I'll be dro—drowned! I can't ho—hold on mu—much lon—ger!"

"We are coming, Coulter!" yelled Pepper.

"I'm nearly fro—frozen to de—death!" chattered the suffering cadet.

"If we only had a line we might throw it to him," said Andy.

"I've got an idea!" exclaimed Pepper. "Come on and get that fallen tree!"

He pointed to the shore, where a long sapling lay partly uncovered in the snow. He skated off for this, with Andy at his heels.

While Andy and Pepper were doing their best to get the sapling out of the snow and drag it over the ice, Jack circled the spot where the *Rosebud* was drifting. The iceboat was now within ten feet of the ice, so he could see Coulter quite plainly. The poor fellow had been ducked in the water and was shaking from head to feet from cold.

"We'll soon have you ashore, Gus!" he called out. "Keep up your courage."

"I—I can't hold on much longer!" was the gasped-out reply. "I am free—freezing to de—death!"

At that moment a blast of air came sweeping across the lake. It caught the sail of the iceboat and tilted the craft over in the water.

"Oh! oh!" screamed Coulter, and then, as the iceboat whirled around, the exhausted cadet lost his grip and commenced to slip slowly downward. Soon he was in the water up to his shoulders.

"Save me!" he yelled. "Oh, Ruddy, don't let me drown! Please sa—save m—me! Please!" And then of a sudden his head went under out of sight!

Jack was for the moment struck dumb with horror. He felt that Coulter was drowning before his very eyes. Then a sudden noble determination came to him, and measuring his distance carefully he leaped for the iceboat and managed to catch the swaying mast. He went down in the water up to his knees, but held on to a stay with his left hand.

The icy water made the youth gasp. But he set his teeth hard and looked down for Coulter. Presently he saw the other cadet bob upward. Then a hand came up and was waved frantically. Jack tried his best to reach that hand, but could

not. Then Coulter commenced to sink again from sight.

"I must save him! I must!" thought Jack, and an instant later leaped boldly into the waters of the icy lake.

CHAPTER XXIX

A REAL HERO

It was a desperate plunge to take, for the former major of the school battalion ran the risk of getting a chill that would kill him. But Jack was a hero, and he could not bear to see Gus Coulter drowned before his eyes.

As the icy waters closed over him, he struck out boldly for the spot where he had last beheld the struggling youth. Then his hand came in contact with Coulter's body and he caught the cadet by the arm.

As soon as Coulter felt himself touched, he swung around, and the next instant had Jack by the shoulder, in a grip like that of death itself.

The former major of the school battalion realized only too well that he must not let the drowning boy catch him by the neck, otherwise both would go down to rise no more. He shoved Coulter as far off as possible and at the same time struck out to regain the surface of the lake.

When the pair came up they were some distance from the iceboat and also some distance from the edge of the ice.

"Help! help!" yelled Jack to Pepper and Andy.

The latter had succeeded in getting the sapling free of the snow, and were dragging it to the ice on the lake-shore.

"Hello, Jack's in, too!" cried Andy, in horror.

"Hurry with the tree!" yelled Jack, as he commenced to swim for the edge of the ice. "Quick now, or we'll both go down again! This water is frightfully cold."

A few strokes brought Jack and Coulter to the edge of the ice. Coulter was still holding fast, but his strength was rapidly growing weaker. His head shook so that his teeth rattled like castanets.

Luckily Jack reached a spot where the shore ice was tolerably firm. More than this, the water was somewhat shallow, so he could stand on the bottom while Pepper and Andy shoved out the end of the sapling to him.

"Here, I'll lift Gus out!" he called, his own teeth chattering not a little. "He ca—can't hel—help hi—himself!"

He lifted the other cadet as high as he could and with a shove sent him rolling on the ice beyond. Andy and Pepper caught Coulter by the feet and immediately dragged him out of harm's

way. Then Jack caught hold of the end of the sapling and was hauled up by his chums.

"How in the world did you fall in?" gasped Andy.

"I didn't fall in—I ju—jumped in!"

"Oh, Jack!" came from Pepper. "Talk about nerve! But come, you had better get to shelter as soon as you can."

"Yes, I fe—feel as if I wa—was turning to i—i—ice!" chattered the other.

"The Darwood farmhouse is just over the hill, let us run to that," suggested Andy. "Here, put on my sweater!" and he stripped off the garment in an instant.

"Do—dont leave m—me!" came from Coulter. He was on his knees, being too weak to rise to his feet."

"I'll carry you on my back!" cried Pepper. "Come, take hold."

Coulter was too far gone to aid himself, and Andy had to place him on Pepper's back. Then off the whole party started, Andy holding Jack by the arm and thus giving him some support.

"Where did Ritter go?" asked Jack, as they sped over the hill in the direction of the farmhouse mentioned.

"I think he went up the lake, in the direction of the Saldy farm," answered Andy.

The Darwood farmhouse set back from the road, among some cedar trees. Rushing up to the back door, the boys pounded vigorously.

"Who is there?" demanded a man's voice, and then Mr. Darwood showed himself.

"Please let us in, we are nearly frozen!" cried Jack.

"Hello! been in the water, eh?" cried Samuel Darwood. "Come right in and I'll stir up the fire!" and he stepped aside that the cadets might enter.

When Pepper deposited his burden in a chair it was seen that Gus Coulter was in a bad way. His eyes were closed, and he was shaking as with convulsions.

"Here, we'll strip off some of his wet clothes and rub him down!" cried Andy. "And can you get something hot to drink, Mr. Darwood?"

"Sure I can," cried the farmer. "But I'll pile some wood on the fire first!" he added.

He was as good as his word, and soon the fire was roaring, and the kitchen got thoroughly warm. The farmer was home alone, but he knew how to make some hot coffee, which he speedily offered to all of the cadets. Coulter could hardly drink, and it was a good half-hour before he felt at all like even speaking. He was propped up in a big rocking-chair directly in front of the fire, and

Andy and Pepper took turns at trying to restore his blood to circulation. Jack was not so far gone, and soon felt quite like himself. The wet uniforms were hung up to dry, Mr. Darwood in the meantime lending the lads some other garments. He had been the one to cut the ice from the lake at that spot, so he felt in some measure responsible for the mishap, even though he had put up several danger signs, to which Ritter and Coulter had paid no attention.

"I don't know that we will care to skate back to the Hall," said Pepper. "Mr. Darwood, could you take us back in your sleigh, if we paid you for it?"

"I'll take you back, and it shan't cost you a cent," answered the farmer, quickly.

"Hadn't we better find out what became of Reff Ritter?" questioned Jack.

"I'll run over to the Saldy farm and see," answered Andy, and set off without delay.

While Andy was gone, Samuel Darwood went to the barn to hitch up his team. Jack, Pepper and Coulter remained in the kitchen. Coulter sat staring at the fire, but occasionally his eyes wandered to Jack. Suddenly, while the others were silent, he spoke.

"Say, but you're a fine fellow, Jack Ruddy!"

he said. "A fine fellow! And I'm a—a skunk! That's what I am, a low-down, mean skunk!"

"Never mind now, Gus," answered Jack, kindly. He hardly knew what to say at this outburst.

"You—you jumped in and saved me from drowning, didn't you?"

"Yes. But anybody would do that, Gus, for a schoolmate."

"No, they wouldn't; Reff Ritter wouldn't. He would have left me to drown!" And Coulter shuddered. "You're a real hero, Jack Ruddy! And I'm a—a skunk; yes, a mean, low-down skunk—and I always have been!" And now Gus Coulter buried his face in his hands.

"Jack certainly deserves great credit for jumping in after you," said Pepper, warmly. "It was a mighty cold plunge for anybody to take."

"Oh, let's drop it!" came modestly from the hero of the occasion.

"I am not going to drop it!" retorted Gus Coulter, with spirit. "You saved my life, and I want everybody to know it, especially Reff Ritter. He would have left me to drown!"

"Reff had to save himself. He was chilled to the bone when we got him out," answered Jack.

"If you had been Reff you wouldn't have run away and left me to drown," went on Coulter, stubbornly.

At this Jack was silent.

"You don't know it all, Jack Ruddy. Reff and I had a quarrel. He said he—he didn't want to have anything more to do with me. I believe he—he would have been glad to have me drown!"

"Oh, don't say that, Gus!" burst out Pepper.

"But I will say it!" flared out Gus Coulter. "After this I am going to cut Reff Ritter! And I am going to tell what I know about him, too! And I am going to get Nick Paxton to tell what he knows, too!"

"What do you know about him?" asked Jack, with sudden interest.

"Oh, I know a good deal."

"Coulter, answer me honestly. Do you know anything about his dealings with a certain man named Cameron Smith?"

"Oh, do you know that fellow?" questioned the other cadet, and he stared wonderingly at Jack.

"I know a little about him."

"Don't you have anything to do with him, Jack! And don't you have much to do with Reff! They are both bad! Oh, you don't know how bad!" And Gus Coulter shook his head to emphasize his words.

"What did you and Reff quarrel about, Gus?" asked Pepper.

"We quarreled about—about—— Oh, I don't

know how I can speak of it! But I suppose I've got to, if I want to remain honest. We quarreled over something I found one day in his private box. I got suspicious of him, and when he was taking a nap I took his key and opened the box. And in the box what do you suppose I found?"

"What?" came simultaneously from Jack and Pepper.

"Your watch and chain, Jack."

CHAPTER XXX

THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED—CONCLUSION

"My watch and chain!" cried the former major of the school battalion.

"Yes."

"What did you do about it? Why didn't you report it to me, or to Captain Putnam?"

"I was so stunned I didn't know what to do. I couldn't believe that Reff had taken them, and that he was guilty of the robberies that were going on. I locked the box up and put the key back in his pocket. That night I accused him of the theft, and we had a quarrel and almost came to blows. He said he didn't take the watch and chain, that he found them in the gymnasium near the lockers. He said he was only keeping them to get square with you, and that he would return them to you before the term closed."

"Found them in the gym?" repeated Pepper.

"I don't believe it," came firmly from the former major of the school battalion. "I believe

he took them; and I believe he took the other things, too!"

"And I believe that myself, now!" cried Gus Coulter. "Oh, my eyes are open! I used to think Reff was a pretty good fellow, even though something of a bully, but I am learning that he is bad through and through. Paxton saw him sneaking through the dormitories at night, and he got afraid of him and cut him."

"And what of Cameron Smith?" asked Jack. "You said he was bad?"

"He is. I didn't know it at first, but I heard about it during the holidays, when he and Reff went off on what they called a good time.

"Can you give me Smith's real address?"

"He claims to come from Boston, but I know Reff once sent him a letter addressed to Springfield, care of the Excelsior Hotel."

Having once opened his mind, Gus Coulter talked freely of his doings with Reff Ritter. He said the bully had quite some money at times, but the amount was quickly spent.

Just as Mr. Darwood drove around to the door with his sleigh Andy came back to the farmhouse.

"I had some hot words with Ritter," he explained. "He was just as bullying as ever, and gave us no credit for hauling him out of the lake,

and he said if Coulter was drowned it would be his own fault. Oh, he is the limit!"

The ride to Putnam Hall was a short one, and on arriving at the school the cadets hurried to their dormitories to change their damp clothing for suits which were perfectly dry. In the meantime Jack asked Pepper to find Captain Putnam and tell the master of the school that he wished to see him on a matter of great importance.

A little later the former major of the school battalion entered the captain's private office, followed by Pepper and Andy. They found Captain Putnam staring at a telegram that had just come in.

"Well, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"I've got something to tell you, sir," returned Jack, and as briefly as possible he narrated what had occurred on the lake and repeated what Coulter had told him. As he progressed Captain Putnam shook his head sadly.

"It must be true," he said almost brokenly. "It all fits in—this telegram and what you you say.

"The telegram?" repeated Jack.

"Yes, Ruddy. This telegram is from Mr. Ford. He states that Cameron Smith has been caught and has made a confession that he looted the safe at Point View Lodge. Smith was partly intoxicated at the time of his capture, and informed

the detective that some jewelry he had in his possession had come from Reff Ritter. He stated that Ritter took the stuff from the cadets and the others while they slept, and it was Smith's part to pawn the things and divide the proceeds."

"And Ritter was guilty of all the thefts at the Hall?" cried Pepper.

"Yes, and he even took some of his own things, just for a blind, according to this man Smith. What Coulter has to say, and Paxton, seems to corroborate his story."

"What a terrible thing to do!" murmured Jack.

"Smith had a bunch of pawn tickets hidden away in a drawer, and they represent all the things taken from this school, and they also represent some other things, namely, those lost by you, Snow, at the time the horse ran away with you."

"Then it was Cameron Smith after all whom I saw, and who robbed me when I was unconscious!" cried the acrobatic youth.

"Yes. He was a bad man, and I have no doubt but that he was the one to lead Ritter astray."

"What are you going to do with Ritter?"

"I cannot do otherwise than have him arrested. But I hate to have such a scandal attached to the school," and Captain Putnam heaved a sigh that came from the bottom of his heart.

In the meantime, Reff Ritter had come back to

Putnam Hall in another sleigh, and had gone to his dormitory to change his clothes. Here he was confronted by Coulter and, a little later, by Nick Paxton, and a hot discussion arose, which ended in blows. Both Coulter and Paxton fell upon the bully together and punished him severely. The pair told Ritter what they thought of him, and each declared that he was going to expose the bully to Captain Putnam.

"I'll tell all I know about Ruddy's watch and chain, and about you and that Cameron Smith, too!" declared Coulter.

"Don't you do it!" shouted Ritter.

"And I'll tell what I know about your sneaking in and out of the dormitories at night," added Paxton. And then he and Coulter went off together.

They reached the office just as Jack, Andy and Pepper were about to leave. Each told his story, and both were closely questioned by the master of the school.

"How long ago did you find this out about the watch and chain, Coulter?" demanded Captain Putnam.

"Only a few days ago, sir."

"You should have told me before. And you, Paxton, should have told me about Ritter's sneaking around."

"Oh, I thought it was only fun at first," pleaded Paxton.

"He is undoubtedly guilty, and there remains nothing to do but to have him arrested."

It was not long after this when he and George Strong went on a hunt for Reff Ritter, to place him in the guardroom until an officer of the law could be summoned. Ritter could not be found, and it was not until some time later that Peleg Snuggers brought in the information that the cadet had been seen leaving the Hall, dress-suit case in hand, by a side door.

"He has run away!" cried Goerge Strong.

"If so, perhaps it is just as well," murmured Captain Putnam. "To prosecute him in court would create a terrible scandal! I would rather pay for the stolen things out of my own pocket!"

Reff Ritter had indeed run away. By some means unknown he managed to get to a town at the end of the lake and there boarded a midnight train bound West. He was traced as far as Chicago, but that was the last seen or heard of him until many years later, when it was learned that he had gone to Alaska with some gold miners. He got very little gold for a large amount of hard work, and drifted from place to place, picking up odd jobs that offered themselves.

The announcement that Ritter was the fellow

who had perpetrated the many thefts at Putnam Hall created strong excitement in the school. But the matter was hushed up as much as possible by Captain Putnam, and the master saw to it that every cadet got back the things that belonged to him, and also squared matters with the teachers.

In due course of time Cameron Smith was tried for the robbery of Point View Lodge and was sent to prison for a term of years. He admitted robbing Andy after the runaway, and the acrobatic youth got back from the pawnbrokers the things taken on that occasion.

After the excitement had passed, Jack, Pepper, Andy and their chums of the senior class buckled down to hard work for the rest of the term. As a consequence, Jack graduated at the head of the class, with Joe Nelson, second; Andy, third; Stuffer, fourth; Pepper, fifth; Henry Lee, sixth, and Fred Century, seventh.

"I must congratulate you, Ruddy," cried Captain Putnam, warmly. "All through your term at this school you have made a record to be proud of. And the other graduates have made fine records, too. I shall hate to part with all of you."

"And I shall hate to leave Putnam Hall," answered the former major of the school battalion. "I have had the time of my life since I have been here."

"So have I!" put in Pepper.

"The best ever!" chimed in Andy.

"I shall never forget Putnam Hall, no matter where I go," came from Stuffer.

"The best school there ever was!" added Joe Nelson.

And now, kind reader, let me add a few words more and then bring this story of "The Putnam Hall Mystery" to a close. As I promised some years ago, when I gave you "The Putnam Hall Cadets," I have now related in detail the most important events that transpired at the military school during the first years of its existence. What took place there after Jack Ruddy and his chums left will be found set down in another line of books called "The Rover Boys Series," starting with "The Rover Boys at School." In that volume you will not only meet the three jolly Rover brothers—Dick, Tom and Sam—but also learn more concerning the doings of Bart Conners, Harry Blossom and Dave Kearney, and again meet that dictatorial old teacher, Josiah Crabtree, and the bully, Dan Baxter, and his toady, Mumps. The Rover boys went to Putnam Hall for a number of years, and had just as good a time as did Jack and his friends.

The graduation exercises at Putnam Hall were

that year very elaborate, and many visitors were present, including the parents and brothers and sisters of the graduates, and Mr. and Mrs. Ford, and Laura and Flossie.

"Oh, I am so glad that you came out at the head of the class, Jack!" cried Laura, as she came up to shake his hand.

"Thank you very much, Laura," he answered, and then, as he took her hand he looked full into her clear eyes. "I'd rather have your congratulations than anything else," he added.

"Oh, Jack!" she murmured, and then she gave him a glance that thrilled him through and through. Heretofore, they had only been friends, but from that moment a deeper sentiment seemed to stir them both, and, years later, when Jack became settled in business, pretty Laura Ford became Mrs. Ruddy. In the same year, Pepper, who went into the insurance business with his father, married Flossie; and all were very happy. Andy remained a jolly bachelor, to visit one or the other of his chums, as suited him. He went into business with Jack, and the firm prospered greatly.

The fun, when the school broke up for the term, was of the never-to-be-forgotten variety. Great bonfires were lit along the lake-shore, and around these the cadets gathered, to sing and "cut up" generally. Some of the boys caught Peleg Snug-

gers and made him ride a wooden horse, while others captured Mumps and made the sneak dive head-first into a barrel that contained several pounds of pulverized charcoal. When the cadet came forth he was a sight to behold. One bonfire was made up of discarded schoolbooks.

"Farewell to thee forever!" cried Pepper, as he cast in an old grammar and a volume of Cicero's works. "Never again shall I need thee, thank goodness!" And this speech brought forth a roar of laughter.

"Everybody in a grand march!" shouted Andy, a little later. "Jack, as our old major, you must lead off!"

"So I will," answered Jack, with a happy smile. "Battalion, attention! Present firebrands! Forward, march!"

And then the cadets marched around and across the campus, waving their firebrands, and singing and cheering lustily. And here let us wish them all good luck and say good-by.

THE END

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